

1 Corinthians 7:12-16  
Covenant Children: Unclean or Holy?  
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Today we had the privilege of baptizing a covenant child. This baptism with water didn't make Zachary a member of God's covenant people. Zachary was already a member of God's covenant people because he has believing parents. We baptized him as a formal recognition that he is a covenant child.

What is the advantage of a being a covenant child? To answer this question, I like using the same imagery which the Apostle Paul used in Romans chapter 11. There Paul compared God's covenant people to a good olive tree, and Paul compared the unbelieving world to a wild olive tree. A child is either a natural branch on the good olive tree or a natural branch on the wild olive tree. It is much better to be a branch on the good olive tree. Being a branch on the good olive tree represents the many privileges of being a part of the visible church. God's people regularly assemble to worship God on Sundays and to hear the preaching of the word and to pray for God's blessings. The church is where God regularly works His miracles of grace.

In Paul's metaphor, some wild olive branches are grafted onto the good olive tree, and they bear fruit. Now that is not natural nor what a farmer normally does. What a farmer normally does is to take some young branches from a good olive tree and graft them onto the sterile wild olive tree. Then the good olive branches use the sap from the useless wild olive tree to bear fruit. Paul, in his metaphor, grafts some sterile branches from a wild olive tree onto

the good olive tree and miraculously they bear fruit. Normally if you graft a sterile branch onto a fruit bearing tree, the sterile branch still cannot bear fruit. In this portion of his metaphor, Paul goes against what is natural to illustrate the miracle of the new heart which God gives the pagan at the time of his salvation. Paul is illustrating this new heart when he talks about grafted on wild branches which bear fruit. So some pagans believe and some wild olive branches are grafted onto the good tree, but won't you agree that it is still much better to be a natural branch on the good tree? That is what a covenant child is in this metaphor. We are very grateful that Zachary is a natural branch on this good tree and not a natural branch on the wild olive tree of the unbelieving world.

Again, we are grateful that Zachary is a natural branch on the good tree, but we also are praying that Zachary will bear the fruit of faith. Not all branches on the good olive tree bear the fruit of faith, but our prayer is that Zachary will. Tom and Sarah as parents and we as a church have also committed ourselves to taking responsible advantage of those outward and ordinary means whereby God communicates the benefits of redemption. We know that God uses the preaching of the Word to give people the gift of faith, and that is one reason why covenant parents bring their children to church. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. Of course, covenant children are exposed to God's words in other ways as well. I know that one of the formative influences in my life was my regularly reading a Bible story book at my grandmother's house. The Apostle Paul noted that Timothy had from infancy known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make one wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

When a branch bears fruit, it does so because it has a living union with the tree such that the life giving sap of the tree reaches the

branch. Our baptism with water symbolizes that life giving union which causes a branch to bear fruit. The water which comes down on the child represents the Holy Spirit whom Jesus pours out from heaven. The outpoured Holy Spirit baptizes or immerses a person into a permanent saving union with Jesus. The immersion in the baptism of the Spirit is not a temporary dipping into water or into the Spirit but a permanent immersion into a saving union with Jesus.

We rejoice that Zachary is a natural branch on the tree. We pray that the symbolism of his baptism with water will be realized in his life. We pray that the Holy Spirit will establish that vital saving union with the tree such that the sap of God's saving grace will flow into his life. We will fulfill our responsibility and take advantage of the outward means, especially exposure to God's Word. We will pray for the Spirit to make those efforts effective by giving the gift of faith. Of course, the believer does the believing, but the Spirit gives the believing heart. The Spirit implants that irresistible disposition toward faith in Christ which is the defining characteristic of the person who is born again.

This is our understanding of the spiritual status of our covenant children. They are natural branches on the good olive tree of the covenant people. In their younger years, natural branches have not yet born the fruit of saving faith because they are tender shoots not yet to that point of development. Yet our prayer is that they will at the appropriate time bear that fruit.

Let's now look at our Scripture reading for today. This is one of the passages which I believe proves that the children of believers do indeed have a spiritual advantage over children of the world. This passage refers to the children of believers as holy.

Let's consider the background of this passage. There were apparently some married couples in the Corinthian church where one spouse had become a Christian and the other had remained in paganism. Some of these Christians in this situation feared that marriage to an unbeliever somehow defiled them spiritually. They thought that their moral responsibility was to get a divorce and to separate themselves from their unbelieving spouse. Paul argued against this. Paul argued that instead of the unbelieving spouse defiling the believing spouse, the believing spouse is sanctifying the unbelieving spouse. Paul's proof was that the children of the mixed marriages were holy.

What does Paul mean here by holy? To be holy means to be set apart for God. Paul does not mean that these children were necessarily regenerate in their earliest years. What I believe is most likely is that Paul meant that these children were baptized members of the covenant community, the visible church.

Now this was not the case under the old covenant. Under the old covenant, the child of such a mixed marriage was not regarded as holy. In the book of Ezra, we read about a situation where some of the men of Israel had married pagan women and had children by them. This was resolved by the men putting away and separating themselves from both their pagan wives and their children by them. We read about the sin in Ezra chapter 9:

- 1 When these things were done, the leaders came to me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.

- 2 "For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of those lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass."
- 3 So when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished.

We read about the resolution in Ezra chapter 10:

- 1 Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly.
- 2 And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra, "We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this.
- 3 "Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and those who have been born to them, according to the advice of my master and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.
- 4 "Arise, for this matter is your responsibility. We also are with you. Be of good courage, and do it."

This same situation arose a few decades later in the time of Nehemiah:

Nehemiah 13:23-25

- 23 In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.

- 24 And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people.
- 25 So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves. ..."

That is the way this situation was dealt with under the old covenant when the people of God were in spiritual childhood, when the Holy Spirit was not yet poured out in new covenant fullness, when the emphasis was on cultural separation from the pagan nations.

Under the new covenant, the believer is still commanded not to marry an unbeliever, not to marry outside the faith. Yet under the new covenant, there are mixed marriages for another reason. Under the new covenant, the gospel often converts pagans to the worship of the true and the living God. There are pagan marriages in which one of the couple becomes a Christian and the other does not. Some Christians with pagan spouses at Corinth wanted to know if they should stay in this mixed marriage. Or should they take the course of action which was appropriate at the time of Ezra?

Paul's answer was that things are different in this age. And the proof for this was that the new covenant church did not regard the children of such mixed marriages as unclean or pagan. The new covenant church viewed and accepted them as holy, as covenant children, as young Christians.

Let's think through Paul's advice. Paul's response was that if the unbeliever is willing to stay married to the Christian, allowing the Christian to live true to Christ, then the Christian should stay in the marriage. Paul then defended his response by stating that rather than the unbelieving spouse defiling the believing spouse, the believing spouse sanctifies the unbelieving spouse. The holiness of the Christian spouse decisively affects the unbelieving spouse rather than *vice versa*. It influences his life style. It exposes him to divine blessings. It confronts him with the gospel. This is consistent with the prophecy that the Messianic age would be a time when holiness would aggressively spread (Zechariah 14:20-21). Look at what Paul said in verse 16 of our text for today:

16 For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

Paul then gave the proof for this assessment of the situation. Paul needed some unquestionable fact to serve as his starting point for an argument for his evaluation and counsel. He found that starting point in the spiritual status of the children of these religiously diverse couples. Paul pointed out that the children were holy. This was Paul's foundational given. This was something everyone knew and already accepted. This was the undisputed fact upon which he built his argument for maintaining the marriage. If the children were holy in some sense, then this proved that the holiness of the believing spouse predominated over the defilement of the unbelieving spouse.

Now this raises the question as to how this fact was a settled point on which to build his case. The answer is obvious if the covenant children were already baptized members of the church. The

children would be holy in the sense that they are members not of the pagan world but of God's covenant community. They are set apart in that the promises of the covenant belong to them as a birthright and are theirs to claim in faith.

Paul was pointing out that the new covenant church did not treat these children of mixed marriages the way Ezra treated them under the old covenant. The new covenant church had treated these children with one believing parent the same way they treated the children with two believing parents. The new covenant church baptized them and accepted them as part of the visible church.

There are two ways to become a part of God's people, the visible church. You are born into the church, or else you are born into the world and profess faith in Jesus. If you are born into the church, we call your baptism covenant baptism. If you are not born into the church and profess faith in Jesus, we call your baptism proselyte baptism. If you are born into the church, you are a natural branch on the good olive tree. If you were not born into the church and professed faith in Jesus, you are a branch from the wild olive tree which was grafted onto the good olive tree. In either case, you are now a part of God's holy nation. That is language we find in 1 Peter:

9 But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; ...

The duty of every member of God's holy nation, the visible church, is to meet the obligations of the covenant. The obligations of the covenant are faith and faith's necessary fruit. Faith's

necessary fruit are repentance and obedience. Every Lord's Day as we preach the Word, we are exhorting God's people from the Word to look to Jesus in faith and to bear the fruit of faith in their lives. This is the on-going responsibility of all of God's people, both the children and the adults, both the young and the old, both the natural branches and the grafted on branches.

Yes, those who have savingly believed will persevere in their faith. But how will they do so? If a person has savingly believed, he is going to want to attend the preaching of the Word and the worship assembly. God will use those outward means to nourish and strengthen and confirm that faith. Those who have professed to believe in Jesus but have not really will not faithfully take advantage of these means of grace, and they often eventually lose interest in the church altogether.

The old Puritans had a name for this strengthening and nurturing one's faith over time. They called it improving one's baptism. Improving one's baptism is even discussed in the Westminster Larger Catechism:

Q.167. How is our Baptism to be improved by us?

A. The needful but much neglected duty of improving our Baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others; by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements; by growing

up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavoring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body.

Let me leave you with this thought. Rejoice in your baptism and all that it symbolizes. And pray that God will give you the gift of faith and will strengthen and confirm your faith over time, so that you may more and more experience all that is symbolized by your baptism. The symbolized grace, the outpouring of the Spirit, is not a one time event. It is a continuing event. Sometimes Jesus pours out His Spirit upon us in greater abundance and sometimes in lesser abundance. When Jesus pours out His Spirit upon us in greater abundance, we experience more of the saving power of our union with Christ. We feel closer to Him and more secure. Our faith is stronger. We call this being filled with God's Spirit. Take advantage of the means of grace: the Word, sacraments and prayer. Pray for Jesus to pour out His Spirit upon you in ever greater abundance. Resolve to improve your baptism and to experience more and more all that is symbolized by it. Pray for these blessings for yourself. Also pray for them for others, especially for our covenant children.