

“GOSPEL-CENTERED LIVING” Part 1

Galatians 2:11-16

Introduction: John Stott was one the most respected Bible Expositors in recent history. He said of the episode described in this passage of Galatians:

“This is without doubt one of the most tense and dramatic episodes in the New Testament. Here are two leading apostles of Jesus Christ face to face in complete and open conflict.”

Don’t miss the drama of what is happening here! Think of who these two men were! Consider their importance to the early church! If you read the Book of Acts, one way to divide the narrative is to see chapters 1-12 with Peter as the chief apostle, and from the human perspective, at the center of the activity of the church in Jerusalem. At the end of that chapter Peter departs to “*another place*,” and only briefly returns to the story in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. [Was that when he made the visit to Antioch that Paul describes here? Possible, but we can’t be sure.] In chapters 13-28 the Church in Antioch becomes the center of attention, and the Apostle Paul emerges in his role as the missionary to the gentiles. The narrative of Acts shows what Paul is arguing in this first part of Galatians: he and Peter were both Apostles in the fullest sense, authorized representatives of Jesus. Now consider what happened here between them.

Here in Galatians, Paul describes not a conflict in doctrine, the two men were of one mind in terms of the Gospel, but a conflict in practice, the application of the doctrine to life. The issue here is not whether Peter believed and preached the same Gospel as Paul. We’ll see several hints here as we have in the first chapter of the letter that they were solidly on the same page theologically. Paul here is referring to an example from the past when Peter came to Antioch, and, for a time at least, was not living consistently with the truth of the Gospel that he professed. He preached Grace, he lived under Grace, but then, in order to win the favor of some fellow Jews, for a time, Peter was acting hypocritically, not living consistently with the truth of the Gospel. There was a sort of “cultural peer-pressure” as Peter suddenly withdrew from fellowship with the gentile believers apparently to appeal to the cultural sensibilities of some Jewish Christians who had come to Antioch. He preached grace, but his conduct was implying that something more was needed, that tradition and law were necessary “supplements” to grace, and so, the separation between Jew and Gentile needed to be maintained. Peter knew better, and Paul reminded him of that.

The *Maine Idea:** The Gospel of Grace should result in a changed life as Christ lives in us and through us. We’ll look at three admonitions drawn from that firm foundation: 1) Be Wary of slipping into Hypocrisy (if it happened to Peter it could happen to us!); 2) Be Willing to confront one-another in love (Paul did it, for

Peter's sake, and for the sake of the church, so must we); and 3) Be Wise to base your actions on God's truth (in other words, live in the light of the Gospel!)

I. Be Wary of slipping into Hypocrisy (2:11-13): We need to walk "in step" with the Gospel! Before you think, "there are a lot of hypocrites around, but there is no way I could act hypocritically," remember that this is Peter, the Rock, the man who walked with Jesus, part of his inner circle, for three years. If it could happen to HIM, well, we'd be hypocrites to think it could never happen to us! A right understanding of Grace should result in gracious living. Right thinking should result in right living, orthodox doctrine (*orthodoxy*) should lead to authentic Christian living (*orthopraxy*). It should. However, if we are not watchful, we can get out of step with the Gospel...

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy... (2:11-13).

We should take heed: this was Peter, one of the twelve, one of the inner circle closest to the Lord, and he was at least temporarily caught up in *hypocrisy*. The word came out of the classical Greek and was used of an actor, wearing a mask, or playing a part on the stage. By New Testament times it was used metaphorically of someone pretending to be something or someone he wasn't...

The story is told of a zoo that was noted for their great collection of different animals. One day the gorilla died, and to keep up the appearance of a full range of animals, the zookeeper hired a man to wear a gorilla suit and fill in for the dead animal. It was his first day on the job, and the man didn't know how to act like a gorilla very well. As he tried to move convincingly, he got too close to the wall of the enclosure and tripped and fell into the lion exhibit. He began to scream, convinced his life was over... until the lion spoke to him: "Be quiet, or you're going to get us both fired!"

This is too serious to joke about! Peter was playing the part of a hypocrite. Consider who this is. Peter was the one used by God to preach the foundational messages as the church was being established! He was the one, who received a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven, and heard the word of the Lord: *what I have called clean do not call common*. He received the contingent from the house of Cornelius, and then went to that gentile home and preached Christ. He saw God open their hearts and saw the manifestation of the Spirit that confirmed these gentiles were accepted by God on the basis of faith alone. He knew the Truth, he preached the Truth! If Peter, after all that, could act inconsistently, even hypocritically, do you think it can't happen to you or me? We need to take heed!

Notice in 2:11 how Paul confronted him: *“To his face.”* Not by complaining behind his back, not by complaining to Barnabas, not by mumbling and grumbling, not by gossiping. Motivated by love and concerned for the unity of the church he spoke to him directly. *“Communication”* is essential to any relationship, and that includes within the church! Not every confrontation can or should be public. In this case, Peter’s conduct had impacted others, so it was necessary, for the sake of the church, to publicly confront his hypocrisy. He knew the truth. He affirmed the same gospel that Paul preached. He had been living in the light of the gospel in relating to gentiles as brothers and sisters, but now, when certain men from James came, he “put on a mask” and separated himself from the others.

In v.12 we are told Peter feared the *“circumcision party.”* It seems Paul is using that phrase to describe Jewish believers, and the issue may have been more cultural than theological. In chapter 3 he’ll get to the false-teachers that are currently troubling the Galatians. By referring to this situation with Peter he is laying the ground work for what is coming. Peter was afraid, we are not told why he feared. But he did. And in a moment of weakness he cut off the fellowship with his Gentile brethren. And when he did it as the leader, so, *“even Barnabas”* was turned, and all the other Jews. They followed his example, his hypocrisy. Put yourself in the place of a Christian Gentile in Antioch and imagine what that would have meant! *“Wait a minute Peter, you said we were brothers, that Jesus broke down the wall and made the two into one, that there was no more division. Do you mean we’re second-class Christians? You can’t eat with us?”*

We need to be wary of slipping into hypocrisy, and be intentional about living a Gospel-centered life. The Gospel of Grace should result in a changed life as Christ lives in us and through us. Secondly, we learn here that we need to...

II. Be Willing to Confront one another in love (14).

¹⁴ *But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”*

The key word in this verse, and perhaps in this whole passage, is *“your conduct was not in step”* – the phrase translates [orthopodeo] – a word which appears only here in the Bible. It literally has the idea of “walking straight.” Frequently in the Bible the life of faith is described as a “walk,” a step by step process. The Psalmist begins that way in Psalm 1:1, *“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked...”* Instead, the righteous man *“...delights in the Law of the Lord...”* He believes God, and lives by faith. Peter knew the truth, he had affirmed and preached the same Gospel message as Paul. Paul has established that in the opening of this letter. There is only one Gospel, and he and

the Jerusalem apostles were of one mind about that. But Peter's action in separating from the gentiles was a contradiction, after group of Jews from Jerusalem arrived in Antioch, was "out of step" with the Gospel (v.14). Theology is not a merely academic exercise of the mind. It also extends to our heart, and to our hands and our feet. Theology is always practical. I think that is what James means when he said "*...I will show you my faith by my works...*"

Paul saw the problem clearly, since it was public and impacted the body, as an apostle he confronted Peter. We might think wait a minute, what about Matthew 18:15-17? In this case, because of the public nature of the hypocrisy, and because of Peter's unique position as one of the foundational leaders of the church, he confronted him publicly. Augustine might have had this kind of situation in mind when he said "It does no good to correct in secret an error which occurred publicly." Out of love for Peter, and for the church, Paul called Peter out – you know better brother – the gentiles are part of the family, by grace through faith, the same as us. There is no room for separation – we are one body in Christ!

The warning here is to be watchful, first of all, to guard our own heart. We need to choose to live in the light of the Gospel. But also we share responsibility for the attitude and reputation of our church. I am not saying that we should be self-appointed "fruit inspectors." But if we love one-another, we need to speak up when we see someone walking a path that is inconsistent with the Gospel. The Gospel of Grace should result in a changed life as we allow Christ to live through us and in us, being wary of our own hypocrisy, willing to confront in love, and...

III. Be Wise to base your actions on God's Truth (15-16). Right doctrine should result in right living. Grace Precludes "works" as a means of justification: Reflect on the implications of Grace. We need to live "gospel-center" lives.

¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified... (Galatians 2:15-16).

"Law" could not save the Jews, how could it possibly save Gentiles? Sometimes it is hard to tell in the Bible where a quotation ends, and the narrator turns to talk to the audience. There were no quotation marks in the original manuscripts! I think Paul is still talking to Peter here, essentially restating what they both know to be true. What does it mean to be "justified"? How is it that we can stand before a holy God? Most people have an idea that faith plus obedience gives us a right standing before God, don't they? There is something skewed in that understanding. It is by faith in Christ that we are justified, that is, declared

“right” with God. Did you learn that little saying in Sunday School as a child: justification = “just as if I never sinned!”? Because our sin was imputed to Christ, He bore our sins, taking the punishment that we each deserved, His righteousness is imputed to our account, by grace, through faith. So, when the Father looks at us, we are in Christ, and He sees only the righteousness of Jesus. So, now, for us, the Temple veil is rent, and we can come to Him directly and boldly.

The words “just” or “right” in the Bible are from a root word meaning “conformity to a standard.” However, “justify” does not mean we are made righteous or good. Because of God’s presence in our life we are saved “*unto good works*” but not because of being good or righteous... Let’s read a couple of verses from another letter Paul. First, Ephesians 2:1-3 describes our former state...

...And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience- ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind...

Then we read in the following verses about how we can come into a right standing before God...

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved- ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith...

Rather, in legal language, we were condemned sinners (Eph 2:1,2) deserving judgment, under God’s wrath, BUT because of God’s intervention in our lives, by means of faith in the substitutionary death of Jesus, we are declared “not guilty.” Spurgeon said, “Morality may keep you out of jail, but it takes the blood of Jesus Christ to keep you out of hell!”

Legally speaking, we who are “justified” are not judged by the merits of our case, in fact we are not judged at all, because Christ was judged in our place (Isa 53:4,5). It’s a good thing we are not judged on the merits, for (2:16), “*...by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified...*” Paul is saying that even we who are Jews know the Law does not justify! So, we have in James 2:10, “*For whoever keeps the whole Law, and yet stumbles in one point, he is guilty of all.*” Even one little infraction and that is it, we are guilty? That seems to very explicit, does it not? Our only hope is the grace of God applying to our lives the righteousness of Christ—justification by faith. Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone.

There are only two ways humans try to approach Holy God: trying to make themselves good enough – no one can do it – or trusting in Jesus and his finished work on our behalf (Eph 2:8.9; Rom 6:23). Most religions of the world, and sadly, many professing Christians, add to the Gospel. They start affirming salvation by grace through faith, and then think adding good works or human traditions is what makes them acceptable to God. The gospel is Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone. He took our sin. We received his righteousness. If you are His, you are forgiven! Am I saying all you have to do is say you believe? No. All you have to do is believe, rightly, who Jesus is, trusting in what he did for you. The result will be a changed life that longs to obey Him out of love. You are saved *“...unto good works, which God before ordained that you should walk in them.”*

What is God saying to me in this passage? So, we should be wary of slipping into hypocrisy; we should be willing to confront one-another in love, and we should be wise, living out the Gospel, remembering that theology is always practical. The Gospel of Grace should result in a changed life as Christ lives in us and through us.

What would God have me to do in response to this passage? We'll see in this letter that people easily drift in their understanding and application of the Gospel. Many embrace the idea of grace, and then think “I'm free! That means I can live any way I want!” No. The Bible says that if you truly believe, there will be fruit as God's Spirit works in you (Eph 2:10; Phil 2:12). John said, *“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life...”* (1 John 5:13). He never says, remember the decision card you signed? Remember when you walked the aisle and prayed the prayer? He says look in the mirror, what do you see? A life being changed by the Spirit? Growing in faith and faithfulness? Loving, without prejudice, the brethren? What does that tell you? If you are living like the world, you should ask, have I really believed? Without a changed life there is no basis for assurance. When we have believed, His Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, we have eternal life! Believing in Jesus means recognizing and responding to Him as the Son of God, and trusting in His finished work as our hope of salvation.

Easy-believism is not biblical. Neither is legalism. Many start with grace through faith, and then begin to add things, their church's thinking about what Christianity should look like. Believe in Jesus, and do these things (or don't do them!) and you are right with God. Paul will get to that present crisis in Chapter 3! (Read 3:1-3!). Grace plus works is not the gospel. When we are *justified* the perfect righteousness of Jesus is reckoned to our account. We are saved. Then we begin to live differently, as the Spirit exposes different areas of our life and brings them into the light of the Gospel. God's love constrains us, God's Spirit convicts us and guides us. That is Good News! And that is truly amazing grace! AMEN.