

PASSAGE – Galatians 2:11-21 NIV

¹¹ When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separated himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group ¹³ The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. ¹⁴ When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow the Jewish customs? ¹⁵ We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles ¹⁶ know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Jesus Christ that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified. ¹⁷ But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn’t that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! ¹⁸ If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker. ¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!

START (the group):

Icebreaker Question: What is the silliest confrontation or argument that you’ve had?

Follow up with your group regarding their applications from last week. Ask them how they did in applying last week’s text.

STUDY (the passage):

Have everyone look back over the text. (Encourage everyone to be looking for something that sticks out to them, something they have a question about, and something God may be telling them to do.)

Ask questions about the text:

1. What sticks out to you from the passage? (Everyone answer)
2. What questions do you have from the text?
3. Why is it so important that Paul address the hypocrisy within the church in Galatia? (v. 12-14)
4. What do you think Paul meant when he said that Peter was not “acting in-line with the truth of the gospel” (v. 14)?

5. Do you ever find yourself trying to earn your salvation through works, being a “good person,” or following the rules? How can we overcome this false mentality?
6. What does it mean to have been “crucified with Christ” (v. 20)?
7. What do you think it means that Paul “died” to the law? What do you think it means that he died to the law through the law? Though he was a law-keeping Pharisee, why was it only after “dying to the law” that Paul began to live for God?

APPLY:

8. How can we make the same kind of mistake Peter did? How can we focus on non-essentials? How can we fail to “eat” with other Christians? How can we overcome this through the Gospel?
9. What is one thing God is asking you to do in response to this passage? (One measurable goal)

PRAY AS A GROUP

Extra Material

Here for the first time Paul explains the gospel as “justification by faith.” Though the meaning of the word “justification” can be inferred from the English text Verses 15-21 include a couple of difficult statements, but that should not obscure the clarity of Paul’s basic teaching in this passage. It is best to understand verse 17 like this: “If we find ourselves falling into sin while we are seeking to live by faith that Christ justifies us, is it because salvation-by-grace has promoted sin? Not at all!” The phrase “while we seek to be justified in Christ” (v. 17, NIV) may lead some to think that these people are not yet saved but only seeking. But the term “we” has meant Peter and Paul since the beginning of verse 15. There is no reason to understand it differently now. So Paul’s term “we” must refer to Paul himself along with other Christians who are seeking to “live” justified, not those seeking to “become” justified. Verse 18 is also difficult. One possible meaning: “If people keep on with the same lifestyle after supposedly receiving Christ, it proves that they really did not grasp the gospel, but were only looking for an excuse to disobey God.” Since verses 19-21 are so powerful and bear most of the freight of Paul’s argument, it is not crucial to understand verse 18. Tell your group that it is possible to skip verse 18 and still understand Paul’s answer to the objection in verse 17. The actual word “justification” has a legal reference, and therefore provides a different perspective on our salvation in Christ. The opposite of “clean” is “polluted” and, therefore, that word would not be sufficient to convey what Christ does for us. It would be easy to think that God accepts us because Christ “cleanses” and gets rid of our sinful thoughts and habits. In other words, we might conclude that we become acceptable to God by actually becoming righteous. But the opposite of “justified” is “condemned.” This means that in Christ, though we are actually sinners, we are not under condemnation. God accepts us despite our sin. So we are not acceptable to God because we actually become righteous. We become actually righteous because we are acceptable to God. John Stott and J. I. Packer explain further. “Justification” is a legal term, borrowed from the law courts. It is the exact opposite of “condemnation” (cf. Deut. 25:1; Prov. 17:15; Rom. 8:33-34). “To condemn” is to declare somebody guilty; “to justify” is to declare him not guilty, innocent or righteous. In the Bible it refers to God’s act of unmerited favor by which he puts a sinner right with himself, not only pardoning or acquitting him, but accepting and treating him as righteous.

“To justify” in the Bible means . . . to declare . . . of a man on trial that he is not liable to any penalty, but is entitled to all the privileges due to those who have kept the law. Justifying is the act of a judge pronouncing the opposite sentence to condemnation—that of acquittal and legal immunity.

Why did Peter originally begin eating with Gentiles?

Peter began eating with Gentiles because God had shown him that no one is “unclean” in Christ. The Old Testament instituted the “clean laws,” a complicated set of regulations for worshipers to follow in order to be “ceremonially clean” and acceptable for the presence of God in worship. Persons could not draw near to God if they ate certain “unclean” foods, if they had touched dead things, if they had a disease or touched someone who did, and so on (see Leviticus 11, 15, 20). This ceremonial law was a teaching method by which God showed that sinful people cannot enter the presence of a holy God without cleansing. Despite Jesus’ allusions to the obsolescence of the ceremonial laws (Matt. 15:3-20), God had to send Peter a vision to show him why the ceremonial law was finished. He saw a great sheet full of animals forbidden for eating in the OT, and he heard a voice saying, “Kill and eat” (Acts 11:7). Peter replied that he would not eat unclean animals. Then God said, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (Acts 11:9). Immediately thereafter, Peter met a repentant Gentile (Cornelius) who receives Christ and is born again. Then Peter realizes, “God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him . . .” (Acts 10:34-35). Afterwards he eats with Gentiles despite criticism (Acts 11:2-3). Even later he asserts that the Gentiles have been “purified [made clean] by faith” (Acts 15:7-9). Through Christ (and only through Christ) all believers were “clean” and acceptable to God, for now it is Christ who makes us “holy in his sight” (Col. 1:23) and “without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:27).

What led him to stop?

When Peter withdrew from the Gentiles, it was not just cowardice but “hypocrisy.” Peter could not have forgotten something as momentous as the vision at Joppa and the conversion of Cornelius. He did not really change his mind or convictions. He still believed the gospel—that we are “clean” through Jesus alone—but he did not act in accord with his deepest convictions. What then led Peter to act as he did? We are told “he was afraid” (Gal. 2:12). Perhaps he was simply afraid of criticism. But certainly racial pride must have entered into it too. Peter and all the Jews had been drilled since their youth that Gentiles were unclean. While hiding beneath the facade of religious observance, Peter and other Jewish Christians were probably still feeling disdain for Christians from “inferior” national and racial backgrounds. Peter was allowing cultural differences to become more important than gospel unity. The NIV translation gives a very good literal sense of Paul’s Greek words. He

says that they were “not *ortho*-walking with the gospel.” (The prefix *ortho* means to be straight.) This means, first, that the gospel is a *truth*—it is a message, a set of claims. It includes the fact that we are weak and sinful, that we seek to control our lives by being our own saviors and lords, that God’s law was fulfilled by Christ for us, that we are now accepted completely though we are still sinful and flawed, and so on. This means, second, that this gospel truth has a vast number of implications for all of life. It is our job to bring everything in our lives “in-line” with the thrust or direction of the gospel. We are to think out its implications in every area of our lives, and seek to bring our thinking, feeling, and behavior “in-line.” The gospel “truth” is radically opposed to the assumptions of the world. But since we live in the world, we have embraced many of the world’s assumptions. Christian living is therefore a continual realignment process of bringing everything in line with the truth of the gospel.

Paul reminds Peter that he “lives like a Gentile” (v. 14). It is unlikely that Peter had simply thrown off all the Jewish customs of diet, dress, and so on. (Actually, there is no need for anyone who becomes a Christian to completely abandon his or her culture.) But it must mean that Peter at least had become more sporadic in his observance of Jewish food laws and other regulations.

Why would that be? He would have come to realize that the food and dress laws were only cultural *Jewish customs* (v. 14; literally the word is “Judaizing”—living in a Jewish fashion). The gospel demoted

Peter's cultural customs in his mind and heart. Why did this change happen to Peter? Because, Paul says, "We who are Jews . . . and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law" (vv. 15-16). While he still may have seen these behaviors as wise (with his mind) and deeply satisfying and familiar (with his emotions), Peter now would have known that they weren't the basis of his relationship with God. That would have made observing them less a matter of pride ("Look at how good I am!") or fear ("If I don't keep these, I'll be spiritually lost"). His national and cultural distinctives would have lost much of their moral and spiritual significance.

Nevertheless, now Peter is insisting that Gentile Christians adopt culturally foreign customs and live like Jews (v. 16). He was forcing them to take on the very customs Peter had been freed from! Despite the fact that he personally had become less culturally bound, he was refusing Gentiles the same Peter's sin was basically the sin of nationalism. He insists that Christians can't really be pleasing to God unless they become Jewish. But nationalism is just one form of legalism. Legalism looks to something besides Jesus Christ to be your acceptability and cleanness before God. Legalism always results in pride and fear psychologically and exclusion and strife socially.

Today there are many examples of exclusive social behavior that reveal a similar disconnect with justification by faith. Here are just a few: One way is to be *sectarian*. Every Christian group or denomination necessarily has many distinctives of belief and practice that have less to do with core gospel beliefs and more to do with specific convictions about ethical behavior or church policy. It is extremely easy to stress our distinctives to demonstrate to ourselves and others that our church is the best one. Another way is to bring *classist*, *nationalistic*, or *racist attitudes* from the world into the church. Many Christians belong to classes, groups, or personality types that we typically disdained in the lives we lived outside the church. Christians with working class roots may dislike Christians from wealthier or more socially "refined" backgrounds and vice versa. Christians from one political persuasion may be upset by the presence of those from the other end of the spectrum. Very talented Christians may feel unhappy that people they have always considered mediocre are part of the church. Socially polished Christians feel uncomfortable around believers who are socially awkward or marginal (and, again, vice versa). If we have fairly strong ties to an ethnic group (e.g. WASP, Hispanic, Chinese, African American), we may feel uncomfortable around people whose cultural backgrounds are different. We may respond to all this as Peter did. We will sit by "those other people" in church but we won't "eat" with them. In other words, we won't really become friends with them. We won't socialize with them, sharing our lives and homes and things with them. We will keep relationships formal and see them at official church meetings only. This, of course, is a serious lapse. It stems from a general feeling of superiority. Our hearts, without the gospel, have to manufacture self-esteem by comparing our group with other groups. But the gospel tells us we are *all* unclean without Christ and *all* clean in him.

In ancient Near Eastern culture, sharing a meal had more significance than it does today. "To sup with" was a synonym for fellowship and unity. (See Revelation 3:20, where Jesus offers to "sup with" us, a metaphor for intimacy.) Therefore, to refuse a meal was an act of personal rejection. It was a failure to treat someone as an equal. For Christians, eating together has additional significance. Jesus adopted the custom of fellowship/supping and raised it to a new level when he instituted the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It was a common meal through which Christians were to renew intimacy with God and each other. It represented our equality before Christ.

Lastly, the most subtle way to lapse into Peter's sin is simply to take our own preferences too seriously and endow with moral significance what is only cultural. For example, it is very hard for Christians from churches with emotional expressiveness and modern music not to feel superior to churches with emotional reserve and classical music, and vice versa. We cannot just see that we are different—we believe that our style and customs are spiritually *better*. This leads to all sorts of divisions in the Body of Christ. Paul's basic argument to Peter is this. Premise A: "God did not have fellowship with you on the basis of your race and culture (v. 15). Though you were good and devout, your race and customs had

nothing to do with it (v. 16).” Therefore B: “How then can **you** have fellowship on the basis of race and culture (v. 14)?” Put another way: “You know that Jewish customs have no spiritual significance for you, so how can you act as if they have spiritual significance for Gentiles?”

What difference does it make?

a. The difference intellectually: Paul’s analysis of racism is significant and unique. He does not simply say that racism is a sin (which it is); he uses the gospel to show us its spiritual roots. Without this knowledge we can’t do anything about it. Paul says the roots of racism are a resistance to the gospel of salvation. In other words, racism is a continuation of works-righteousness in one area of our lives. It is a failure to bring our relationships with other cultures into line with grace-salvation. Racism arises because our hearts still oppose grace and seek ways of self-justification. We try to devise ways to feel superior to others, “cleaner” than others. One way we do this is by making our culture an idol. Extreme cases result in militarism and fascism, but to some degree we all try to use our culture and race to feel superior to others. **Note:** If you are member of a racial majority, your race’s cultural pride is fairly easy to see. If you are a member of a racial minority that is often “put down,” discerning “justification-through-racial pride” is a bit more complex. But it surfaces when you begin to think, “I’m nobler than members of the dominant race. I have suffered more and I’m not an oppressor like they are.” b. The difference practically: Paul’s opposition to Peter was winsome. Why?

Because Paul did not simply say, “Repent of the sin of racism” but “Repent of the sin of forgetting your gracious welcome.” Paul did not focus so much on the behavior-sin as the root of self-righteousness beneath it. This is a very different way of “opposing” someone. When you are trying to motivate people by urging them to see their riches and love in Christ, you are pointing to their value and dignity in your appeal. But when you try to motivate people by threatening them, you will probably feel little respect for them as you do so, and they will (rightly) sense that you are not “on their side.” When we use God’s grace as a motivator, we can criticize sharply and directly, but the other person will generally be able to perceive that we are nonetheless *for* him. No wonder Paul was winsome in this situation! Keep this in mind, too. Peter’s racial pride was grounded in fear (v. 12, “he was afraid”). When our sin is rooted in fear, we need to be loved and strengthened in order to find the courage to do right in spite of our fear. Not only was Peter’s racism “out of line” with the gospel, his cowardice was too. If he is justified in **God’s** eyes (vv. 15-16) why does he need to be justified in theirs? If Paul only said, “Your racism is a violation of the rules of God,” that cowardice would not have been addressed. But when Paul said, “Your racism is a violation of the grace and mercy of God to you,” he was also addressing Peter’s fear. He appealed, “You’ve forgotten Christ’s love for **you**, Peter.”

Do we normally appeal to each other in this way?

No, of course we don’t. That is why there is so little of what Paul will describe in Galatians 6:1-2. (a) We do not provide each other with winsome, grace based, loving rebukes. (b) More basic than that, Christians tend to motivate others with guilt. We tend to say, “You would do this if you were really committed Christians,” indicating that we **are** committed and we hope that others are as good as we are! This is why so many churches quench people’s motivation for ministry.

Here Paul introduces the term “justification” for the first time. Why does he do it here? We should connect this concept with Paul’s controversy with Peter. Traditionally, Jews did not eat with Gentiles because they were “unclean.” When Peter refrained from eating with Gentiles, Paul reminded him of what he had learned through revelation (Acts 11:8-10; 15:8-9): that in Christ we are “clean.” This is what circumcision, the food laws, and all the ceremonial laws were about in the Old Testament. You had to be “clean” to go to worship, to be acceptable in the eyes and presence of God. Though the word “clean” does not show up in Galatians 2:11-13, that is what “circumcision” (v. 12), eating, and all the rules and regulations were about. Now Paul introduces “justification” (vv. 15-16). This can only mean that “justification” is essentially the same thing as being “clean” and acceptable for the presence and fellowship of God.