

THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD'S GRACE MUST BE GUARDED Galatians 2:11-16

Please review this week's catechism.

Did you meet anyone new after last Sunday's worship service?

INTRODUCTION

Describe a time when you either witnessed or were party to a public confrontation/rebuke. How did you feel about the confrontation? What were the issues that provoked the confrontation? Do you enjoy being involved in these sorts of situations? Why or why not?

In our passage today, the apostle Paul recounts an occasion when he opposed the apostle Peter to his face, in public. You don't do this sort of thing without a very good reason, especially in the church where we are repeatedly told to pursue unity with one another. Public confrontation between two major leaders is not usually the way to maintain or promote unity. Therefore, a really important issue must have been at stake for Paul to take such extreme action. Paul tells us why he did this risky and unusual thing in vv. 11 & 14. He did it because Peter was clearly in the wrong, because he was not living in accord with the truth of the gospel. The purity of the gospel message was at stake as far as Paul was concerned. Paul's confrontation with Peter shows us how important it is for us personally and collectively as a church to fight to keep the truth of the gospel pure and at the center of our lives.

STUDY

1. Review the outline of Paul's argument in his letter up to this point and notice how it changes in v. 16 and on into chapters 3-4. What might be some reasons Paul tells this story of confronting Peter at this point in his argument?

Paul has made it clear that those who have come to the churches of Galatia, which he founded at great cost to himself, are false brothers who have infiltrated the church and are perverting the gospel of Christ. They are teaching a false gospel for which they will suffer in hell forever and so will anyone who follows them. The false teachers have said that Paul is inferior to Peter and the other apostles. He is a "Johnny come lately" and does not have the same authority as Peter and the other original apostles. Paul says that the gospel he preaches came straight from Jesus, just like the gospel Peter and the other apostles preach. Peter and the other apostles, when they heard what he was saying did not add anything to his message but recognized the grace of God at work in him that was also at work in and through them. Here, in the climax of the biographical portion of his argument he shows that he is not less of an apostle than Peter because he rebuked him. In addition, Paul tells this story because it serves as an excellent introduction to the main argument of his letter. He is out to show, in contradiction to the false teachers, that salvation is not a result of human effort. Justification before God comes by faith in Christ, not by works of the law. This was the point he made to Peter in front of the entire church at Antioch and so his summary of what he told Peter serves as a perfect introduction to what he wants to say to the churches of Galatia.

2. Read Acts 11:19-26 & 13:1-3. What are some things we know about the church at Antioch and Paul and Barnabas' relationship to it?

The church in Antioch was the first local church made up of a majority of Gentiles or non-Jewish people. Prior to this church coming into existence virtually every church was made up of predominantly Jewish Christians or Gentiles that had become Jewish prior to becoming Christians. Barnabas and Paul, who are Jewish, were two of the primary leaders and teachers in this church in Antioch. It was this church that had commissioned them to go and preach the gospel in the region of Galatia.

3. Read/review Acts 10:1-11:18. What does Peter do that is completely out of the ordinary for a Jewish man in this story (See 10:27-28 & 11:2-3)? Why does he do it (see 10:9-20, 44-48 & 11:15-17)?

Peter associates with Gentiles, preaches the gospel to them, baptizes them as Christians and eats meals with them without requiring that they be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses. He does this because God has shown that he accepts the Gentiles fully as his people by their faith in Christ and not because they obey the law. God has shown him this both by the

vision prior to his going and by the Holy Spirit being given to all the Gentiles while he was preaching the gospel to them.

4. When Peter first comes to Antioch, how does he relate to the Gentile believers there? Why does he do this?

Peter lives with and eats meals with the Gentile Christians. He treats them as equals even though they are not circumcised, eat unclean food and engage in many other “unclean” practices. Peter, by eating with these Gentiles was breaking the law of Moses and demonstrating that God had accepted the Gentiles by faith in Christ and not because they were obeying the OT law. Peter, by his actions, shows that he knows you do not need to become Jewish to become a Christian.

5. What does he do when “certain men from James” arrive in Antioch?

He stops associating with and eating with the Gentile Christians. His behavior influences all the local Jewish Christians who had been in the habit of eating with their Gentile brothers to stop. Even Barnabas was persuaded that he should not eat with the Gentiles.

6. Who are these “men from James”? Why would they object to Peter’s eating with the Gentiles? (See last clause in Gal. 2:12 and then Acts 10:45, 11:2, 18 & 15:1,5)

At the end of v. 12 they are identified as those of the circumcision group. After Peter preaches to Cornelius and the Holy Spirit comes upon the Gentiles we are told that the “circumcised believers were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.” Then when Peter returns to Jerusalem “the circumcised believers criticized him and said, ‘you went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.’” After he explains to them what happens they “had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.’” Finally, in Acts 15, we discover that some of the “circumcised believers” are teaching that the Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses in order to be saved. What we observe through this almost 15 years of church history is the struggle of the church to figure out how to relate to the OT Law. The debate centers around two questions. How does the OT law, which is God’s law, apply to believers in Christ? What is required of a person for God to accept them and count them righteous? A

significant number but not all of the “party of the circumcision” begin to teach that faith in Christ is not enough to belong to the people of God. To be righteous in God’s sight requires faith in Christ and obedience to all of the Mosaic Law. Most likely the “men from James” that Peter feared were not yet confirmed in this position. They were still questioning whether or not you had to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses to go to heaven. They were not yet false brothers. However, they viewed obedience to the law as very important for all Christians, Jew and Gentile. They were, most likely, calling into question the reality of Peter’s faith and his fitness to be the apostle to the Jews.

7. According to vv. 14-16 how serious does Paul view what Peter and the other Jewish Christians are communicating by their withdrawing from eating with the Gentiles? What does he think they are saying by their behavior?

Paul thinks their behavior is entirely hypocritical. They are not behaving as they believe but are trying to please men. Their behavior is deadly because it is communicating that the Gentiles must obey the Law of Moses in order to fully accepted as the people of God. They are, by their behavior, even though they do not intend to do so, forcing the Gentiles to obey the Law in order to be justified. Thus, unwittingly they are cooperating with and promoting a false gospel. They are teaching that men are not saved by grace through faith in Christ but rather on the basis of performing certain “works of the Law.”

8. According to 1 Corinthians 1:22-24 & 2:14, how do all human beings in their natural condition feel about the gospel of Christ?

All natural men think that the gospel of Christ is either offensive or foolish. They do not understand the gospel and therefore cannot embrace it as truth.

9. What does Gal. 2:15 point towards as at least one of the reasons that natural humans do not like the gospel? (See Luke 15:1-2, 28-30, 18:9-12, John 9:34)

Natural men cannot accept the fact that they can do nothing to make themselves right with God. The beginning of the gospel of Christ is the declaration that no one can be made right with God by performing acts of obedience to the Law of Moses or any other law. The good news of God’s grace begins by declaring that human beings are slaves to sin. The reason

so many of the circumcision party eventually demand that only those believers in Christ who are circumcised and who keep the Mosaic law are truly Christian and going to heaven is because they cannot admit that they are entirely sinful. They are unwilling to admit that the law justly condemns them. They insist that they are able to keep the law and thus they deserve to be accepted by God and given eternal life. They cannot admit what the gospel requires that we admit—God would be perfectly just to kill us and send us to hell. There is no act we can perform, no decision we can make, no prayer we can pray, no commitment to do better, no confession we can make that will make us right in God’s sight. God gave the law not to give us something to do in order to gain his favor but to show us how great is our sin. Natural men do not see the law in this way, because they do not see themselves as sinners. They believe they can keep it and in fact are keeping enough of it so that God is obligated to reward them with heaven.

10. Do you often think about how much you deserve to go to hell? Why or why not?

We must fight to keep the gospel of grace pure and at the center of our lives because it is opposed by all humans in their natural condition.

11. Why is Peter’s (and Barnabas’) behavior so shocking?

Paul’s entire rebuke of Peter is based upon the fact that Paul knows that Peter does not believe that obedience to the law of Moses is the way people are made right with God or the ground for Christian fellowship. He knows about Peter’s preaching to Cornelius and his subsequent fellowshiping with him. He knows of Peter’s defense of the gospel of grace that followed. He has had a personal conversation with Peter where they both affirmed that right standing with God has nothing to do with human obedience to the law or performance of any religious ritual. He knows that Peter does not believe that men are made right by keeping the law because he has been eating non-kosher food with the Gentiles in the Antioch church. Therefore Paul is rightly shocked at Peter’s hypocrisy, his acting as though law-keeping matters.

12. What ought we to learn from Peter’s defection?

If it was so easy for the apostle Peter, by his actions, to contradict what he confessed to be true, how much easier is it for us to do the same? If it was so

easy for churches that the apostle Paul founded to be so easily deceived and “bewitched,” shouldn’t we be a little more suspicious of ourselves? We must be on our guard and watch ourselves for any signs of drifting away from the core of the gospel: we are justified on the basis of our faith in Christ and not on the basis of any acts of obedience to the law. In addition, the fall of Peter should give us hope. If Peter fell so grievously and yet was restored so completely (see Acts 15:7-11), then we also may always return to Christ when we have sinned. It is possible to be profoundly deceived and yet to return to Christ from our deception.

13. What are some ways we act as though our salvation depends upon our performance rather than upon Christ?

We confess with our mouths that we are made right with God not because of anything we have done but only because of what Christ has done for us. Yet, by our actions, by the ways in which we treat others, by the ways in which we do acts of obedience, by the ways we respond to our failures in obedience we communicate something very different. When we treat other Christians with suspicion and refuse to fellowship with them because they do not live exactly like us, do we not deny our confession that we and they are only made right with God by faith in Christ alone? If we only feel sure of our salvation when we are daily reading our Bibles and not engaging in any “big” sins are we not denying that we are justified, not by works of the law but by faith in Christ? We are sinners who deserve wrath and condemnation due to our despising of God and his laws and yet we are completely forgiven, no longer condemned, loved by God, promised eternal pleasures at his right hand forever not because of anything we have done but only because of what Christ has done. Does the way we accept one another show that this is the ground of acceptance with God? Does our living the Christian life reflect this freedom and joy?

We must fight to keep the gospel of grace pure and at the center of our lives because it is easily abandoned.

14. What do Jews who believe in Jesus know about the “works of the Law (vv. 15-16)?” (Compare with Acts 15:10)

The point of v. 15 is that there is a distinction between Jew and Gentile. Jews are born into the chosen people of God. They are descendants of Abraham. They grow up knowing the law of God as contained in the OT. They have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth. They have the

temple worship and the priesthood and the promises of God. These are all real advantages that Jews have over Gentiles. However, for all their advantages, none of this made them right before God. Rather than Jewishness being a reason for boasting over Gentiles Paul says that even we, who have been given all these benefits that Gentiles do not have, even we know that no man can be made right with God by obeying the law. If we know that we Jews, with all this information from God were not justified by it, then why in the world would we teach Gentiles that they can be justified by it?

15. Why is it that “the works of the Law” cannot be the basis of being made right with God?

Paul says that the one thing that every believing Jew has come to understand is that the law requires perfect obedience. Anyone who is going to make the claim that God is going to accept them based upon their performance of the law is not paying attention to what the law says. The law repeatedly says you must keep all of the commandments of the Lord perfectly and if you do not then you will be punished with eternal death. Paul says three times in v. 16 that no one, Jew or Gentile, will ever be declared not guilty but perfectly righteous based upon their acts of obedience to the law. The reason is that no one keeps the law perfectly and every infraction of the law deserves death. This is what the law itself says and so Jews who act as though they can be made right with God by obeying the law are arrogant and deceived. When Peter withdrew from eating with the Gentiles he was acting as though it were possible to be made right with God by obeying the law. Paul reminds him and the Galatian churches that is not possible.

Seeking to be made right with God by law keeping envisions a person standing before God and making this kind of argument when God asks, “why should I permit you to enter my heaven?” The Jewish law keeper might say something like this: “I was circumcised on the eighth day of my life. I never ate any unclean food. I went to the temple for the three feasts each year of my whole life and made the required sacrifices. I didn’t have sex with anyone except my wife and then only after we were married. I circumcised my children and taught them the faith in keeping with Deut. 6. I never associated with any unclean people. I gave the tithe and all the other gifts just as the law requires. Therefore, I am innocent of sin and righteous according to the law.” What would God say to such an argument? He would say something like this. “What shall I do about the time you stole apples from your neighbors apple tree when you were ten? What about the lust in your heart towards your brother’s wife you indulged in during every

family reunion? What about the jealousy you felt towards your neighbor because he had more land and flocks than you did? What about all the times you cursed your children or the times you cursed your parents? What about that time you slapped your wife? What about the pride you had in your heart when you were offering your tithes? What shall I do to you for those sins, which all deserve death? How does your keeping one part of the law gain forgiveness for the other parts of the law which you broke?”

This is the great problem that faces every human being. Obedience to one part of God’s law, even if you could argue that you kept some part of it, which I don’t think anyone can argue, does not pay for the times you broke the other laws.

16. What does the term “justified” mean and why are humans only justified by faith in Christ?

This word “justified” is arguably the most important word in the Bible. It is a word taken from the legal profession. It envisions the day each human being will stand in front of God as their judge. The question that faces every human being is this: upon what basis will I be found not guilty of any sin but perfectly righteous so that I can enter heaven and not go to hell? It is only through trusting in Jesus Christ that anyone will ever be forgiven and made righteous. That’s what Paul says in v. 16 says three times. Jesus always obeyed God’s law. He never, not once, sinned. He had no death penalty hanging over his head. When he died, he did not die for his sins but for the sins of everyone who believes in him. Everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ is forgiven for his or her sins because he paid the penalty of death we deserve. God treats everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ as though they always obeyed his laws because God credits all the obedience of Jesus to our account. When we stand before God at the judgment we will not stand there alone. When God asks us why he should let us into his eternal heaven and not send us to hell we will say because Jesus Christ obeyed your law in my place and he suffered the death I was owed. I am innocent and perfectly righteous because of him and therefore, for his sake, because he has earned the right for me to enter your presence you should bring me into heaven.

17. What are you trusting in to be made right with God? If God were to ask you, “Why should I let you into my heaven?”—what would you say to him?

We must fight to keep the gospel of grace pure and at the center of our lives because it is the only way to be made right with God.