

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.

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.

And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

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 a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law,

but by faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to 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.

But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?

Certainly not! For if I rebuild what I have torn down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.

I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.

And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

Galatians 2:11-21

"Peter and Paul, Law and Grace, Works and Faith"

Pastor Stephen Ridge

So we've spent the better part of a month listening to stories Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians, stories about old Israel where Paul had once been Saul, a hyper-zealous, hyper-kosher rabbi, bent on seeing his countrymen hold on to the disciplines and customs and rituals that their ancestors had learned from Moses fourteen hundred years before. But Saul's life suddenly changed when the hot-headed, young rabbi had traveled to Syria and had been accosted by the risen Jesus, shining so bright that Saul's eyes were injured, and saying things that opened Saul's heart to being something, someone different from what he had ever meant to be.

Jesus had sent him down a path that over the years would turn Saul the Rabbi into Paul the Apostle, so the hot-blooded, bigoted rabbi become an apostle of Jesus, sent far away from home to win strangers, Greeks and Celts and Romans to Christ. And the result of such a dramatic change is that it became hard for Paul to return home. So far, Paul has written us about two visits back to the holy city, the first ended when, only after two weeks, his old friends among the rabbi's decided he was a traitor to Israel and needed to die.

The second visit, 14 years later, was longer and more complex. Peter and John and James, the old apostles who had known Jesus in the flesh, finally, formally accepted Paul as a genuine apostle, and his gospel as the real truth, but many in the church still struggled to accept and understand Paul. But not so much Peter! Like all Christians in Judea, Peter was a kosher man. But years before, in the Roman seaport of Caesarea,, Peter had been the first apostle to teach the gospel to Romans, a centurion's family who had believed in Christ, and the Holy Spirit had descended on them, and Peter baptized them, even though not a one of them was kosher.

So, most of chapter 11 in the book of Acts is devoted to Peter trying to explain to the very kosher Jerusalem church elders why he had baptized a bunch of Romans who didn't know Moses from their uncle. Now Peter thought the descent of the Holy Spirit on these foreigners was enough reason to think that God approved, but he spent a long time on the carpet explaining himself to the kosher disciples before the questions died down, and the disciples said to themselves in wonder, "*Then to the Gentiles too, God has granted the repentance that leads to life.*" Most worshiped in wonder, but others just wondered and doubted.

Of course, in the passage I read to you this morning, Paul tells the Galatians the story of how Peter had traveled up to Antioch in Syria, where Barnabas and Paul helped lead a church whose worshipers were mostly Greek and Romans. Perhaps he'd gone there to thank the Gentile disciples for the offering they'd sent to Jerusalem for the famine they were suffering there. Paul tells us Peter sat at table with the Greek and Roman disciples, enjoying their company and eating what he could of their food for a number of days until other Jewish disciples, "*men from James,*" the text tells us, arrived and insisted on separate, kosher arrangements.

Next meal, Peter switched over to the kosher table and other Jewish disciples from the Antioch church, including Barnabas, moved across the room to eat with their countrymen from Judea who, after all, were their guests. So now Paul was looking at a sort of apartheid at the Communion meal, and, being Paul, he stood up and said to Peter in so many words, "Weren't you eating with Greeks and Romans just a few days ago, but now you're going to be kosher because your home boys are here?" How's a Greek supposed to know where he should eat, who his friends are...when you're his buddy on Tuesday, but a day or two later you're a foreigner?"

Now there's some amount of humor in Paul's challenge, and, to Peter's credit, there's no record of him trying to defend his cross-cultural blundering. He knew his friends, James' men from Jerusalem, only ever ate at kosher tables and he didn't want then sitting in self isolation so far from home, and he likely hadn't thought through the optics of a divided Communion meal.

Paul goes on, I think with his tongue still planted in his cheek: *"We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles. Yet we know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. So even we 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."* The point Paul's making is that Peter is not confused about what it takes to be saved. Peter is the one who lay down in a fishing boat and told Christ he was a sinful man. Peter had baptized a whole household of Romans and never told them to be kosher.

Paul goes on to lay out in his letter the obstacle that kept so many kosher Jews from trusting in Christ, Paul writes, *"...if, in our endeavor to be justified by Christ, we too were found to be sinners, does that make Christ a minister of sin? May it never be!"* Paul exclaims. You see, Jesus had taught the Jews, God's chosen people, that *"the kingdom of heaven"* belonged *"to the poor in spirit."* "What nonsense is that!" a proud, kosher soul might react. "We're the Chosen People! We're spiritually rich, right with God! Disciplined! Wise! Stable! Strong!" To which Jesus answered *"...unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*

Remembering his old life as a proud, learned, powerful rabbi, Paul warns the Galatians: *"...if I rebuild what I have torn down,"* if I rely on my zeal, my strength, if I become the master of my salvation, Paul writes, *"I prove myself to be a transgressor."* So Paul describes what really happened in his heart *"...through the law, I died to the law, so that I might live to God."* What Paul learned from mastering the law was how dangerously his own heart could twist what is true to serve his own purposes.

And only Christ was ever able to stop and change that. Paul writes: *"I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives through me."* What Paul's describing here is not some kind of remote heavenly take-over of his life. Paul continued to be Paul, thinking, acting, speaking, and working. But he went through life engaged with Christ, leaning on God's Spirit, learning from God's Word, confident that in the ups and downs of life Jesus was with him and for him. Paul put it this way, he wrote: *"...the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."*

No one understood needing and depending on Christ better than Peter. In John's gospel, last year, we watched Peter promise Christ everything, to stick by him to the end, only to find that Peter didn't know how, couldn't find a way. In the end, three times, Peter backed away from Jesus to save his own skin. And later, after the resurrection, Jesus would ask Peter three times, if Peter loved him. And the answer, three times, was yes. So Jesus renewed his call on Peter's life, three times, *"Feed my lambs...Tend my sheep...Feed my sheep."* And engaged with Christ, leaning on his Spirit, learning from his Word, Peter did just that.

Not perfectly, we learn from Paul today. But I think Peter's sin today was less doctrinal and more cultural. He wanted to reach out to his old friends from home, and he lost track of what a divided Communion table would say to the Greeks and Romans he was only just getting to know. Why do I think Peter knew the gospel, mistakes and all? Because in the book of Acts we'll see, years after this letter was written and sent and read, Paul will be called on the carpet in Jerusalem, in front of the kosher elders there.

And who will have Paul's back? Who will stand up to defend Paul first? Peter will get it right when it matters, and stand by his brother who called him up short back in Antioch. Because that's how grace works. Paul closes our passage today, *"I don't nullify grace, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose."* Christ died so that we don't have to get it right first time out, but also so that we will get it right in the end. Grace leads to a genuine righteousness that the law could never provide, engaged with Christ, leaning on his Spirit, learning from his Word.