

Paul: The Spiritual Abolitionist **Part 2**

(Not Man's Gospel!, Part 17)

TEXT: Galatians 2:11-21

July 5, 2009

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

By way of quick review, in 2:1-10, Paul continued to demonstrate that his gospel was not man's gospel (1:11). He shows in vv. 1-10 how he maintained his independence and equality with the Apostles in Jerusalem (2:2, 6). Yet he also demonstrated his agreement with them concerning the truth of the gospel (in relation to both its source [Christ] and nature [grace not works of the law] vv. 7-9).

2:11-21 is the final event in a series of several carefully selected episodes that Paul chose to prove that his gospel is "Not Man's Gospel" (cf. 1:11). Here in 2:11-21, Paul demonstrates one final time in a climactic, somewhat shocking fashion, his independent authority from the Apostles in Jerusalem, thus demonstrating that his gospel is not man's gospel.

The scene changes from the private council in Jerusalem to Antioch, the birthplace of the first Gentile church where believers were first called Christians (Acts 11:26).

In 2:11-21, Paul retells how he openly rebuked the leading apostle, Peter, for his hypocritical conduct (not walking in step with the truth of the gospel, 2:14), which led Jewish believers and even Barnabas astray.

The comparisons between Paul and Peter in this passage are quite stark. For example, Paul's consultation with Peter in Jerusalem was private (2:1-10). But in Antioch, Paul's confrontation of Peter was public (vv. 11, 14).

Paul agreed with Peter in Jerusalem concerning the truth of the gospel (2:9; consensus in Jerusalem). But, in Antioch, Paul opposed Peter to his face and openly and publicly rebuked him before the church for his contradiction of the truth of the gospel (vv. 11, 14; conflict in Antioch).

In Jerusalem, Paul steadfastly opposed the demands of the false brothers (2:5). But, in Antioch, Peter unfaithfully caved in to the demands of the circumcision party (2:12). Paul was firm (2:5), Peter was fearful (2:12).

This section raises some very important questions. To begin with:

What was this controversy about? Why did Peter stand condemned? Why was it such a big deal not to eat a meal with Gentiles? Why did Paul oppose Peter so fervently and publicly? What was the theological truth that was at stake?

The answer to this last question is found in vv. 5, 14. The issue in both Jerusalem and Antioch was the same, “the truth of the gospel.”

Whether it is in opposition to false brothers (v. 5), an apostle (vv. 11-14), or even an angel from heaven (1:8) defending and preserving the truth of the gospel was the motivating factor in Paul’s life and ministry.

Again, just as in Jerusalem, we see Paul in Antioch continuing in his campaign to abolish spiritual slavery. Throughout his ministry, Paul faithfully and uncompromisingly fought to preserve the truth of the gospel and the believer’s subsequent freedom (2:5, 14). Therefore, Paul details for us two reactions he made in response to Peter’s contradiction of the truth of the gospel.

LESSON:

I. PAUL CONFRONTS PETER’S CONTRADICTION OF THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL (2:11-13).

A. THE CONFRONTATION, v. 11

John Stott commenting on Paul’s confrontation of Peter writes, “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,” (John Stott, *Galatians*, p. 49).

Paul’s confrontation of Peter raises some important questions:

Why did Paul confront Peter so fervently and publicly? What did Peter do that left him clearly in the wrong? Why was it such a big deal for Peter to stop eating meals with Gentile believers? And, what did his eating with Gentiles have to do with the truth of the gospel?

These questions demand careful investigation because of the issue at stake, (i.e., the truth of the gospel).

However, in order to answer the questions and better grasp what is going on, you need to have an understanding of the background involved in Paul’s confrontation.

This controversy involved strict Jews (the circumcision party, v. 12) who refused to eat with Gentile Christians and pressured other Jewish believers to do the same. The reason they refused table-fellowship with Gentile believers is because OT dietary food laws forbid Jewish people from eating certain foods (cf. Lev. 11:-1-15:33; Deut. 14).

Note William Barclay’s description of the exclusive Jewish sentiment towards Gentiles,

“...we must remember the rigid exclusiveness of the narrower Jew. He regarded his race as the Chosen People in such a way as involved the rejection of all others.

‘The Lord is merciful and gracious’ (Psalm 2:5). ‘But he is only gracious to Israelites; other nations he will terrify.’ ‘The nations are as stubble or straw which shall be burned, or as chaff scattered to the wind.’ This exclusiveness entered into daily life. A strict Jew was forbidden even to do business with a Gentile; he must not go on a journey with a Gentile; he must neither give hospitality to, nor accept hospitality from, a Gentile,” (*The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, p. 18).

It was in light of this harsh, rigid, exclusiveness that Peter began feeling the pressure from the demands of the “circumcision party.” Thus, he gradually began to withdraw and separate from Gentile believers.

Now we are in a better position to ask and understand: Why did Paul confront Peter and why was Peter’s behavior such a big deal?

1. PETER’S CONDUCT THREATENED THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH.

Bible scholars point out that the Lord’s Supper was most likely involved in this issue of table fellowship. It was customary in the early church for believers to celebrate the Lord’s Supper together during a meal known as the *Agape* (i.e., Love Feast, cf. Acts 2:42).

William Barclay writes,

“Part of the life of the early Church was a common meal which they called the Agape or Love Feast. At this feast the whole congregation came together to enjoy a common meal provided by a pooling of whatever resources they had. For many of the slaves it must have been the only decent meal they had all week; and in a very special way it marked the togetherness of the Christians,” (*The Letter to the Galatians and Ephesians*, p. 18).

The observance of the Lord’s Supper (a visible gospel) served as the connecting point (basis) of unity and fellowship within the church.

However, the issue of OT food laws threatened to split Jewish and Gentile believers in Antioch and prevent them from sitting down at the same table to share a common meal together. Such a separation would make it impossible to observe the Lord’s Supper together. The circumcision party wickedly seized upon this opportunity to bring in their distorted gospel (1:6-7) and drive a deep wedge between Jewish and Gentile believers.

This possible separation of Jewish and Gentile believers struck at the very root of the church’s unity and life (i.e., its identity as the body of Christ; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 4:1-3; Lightfoot, *Galatians*, p. 112) and Peter’s behavior gave tacit approval to this.

2. PETER’S CONDUCT CONTRADICTED THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL.

Peter was wrong not for his *confession* of the gospel (i.e., denying the truth of the gospel), which Paul has made abundantly clear in 2:1-10 as well as 2:14-16.

Peter was wrong for his *conduct* in regard to the implications of the truth of the gospel (i.e., his contradiction of the truth of the gospel).

J.B. Phillips paraphrases v. 11, “But when I saw that this behaviour was a contradiction of the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas so that everyone could hear...”

This highlights a critical point of emphasis for believers, which is:

We are not only called to *believe* the truth of the gospel but we are also called to *conduct* our lives in accordance with the truth of the gospel.

The gospel calls for both *sound belief* and *authentic behavior* (cf. Eph. 4:1).

When Peter first arrived in Antioch, his initial conduct confirmed both Jew and Gentile free from the law as a matter of justification (2:16; that a man is justified by faith alone and not by works of the law).

One Bible teacher commenting on the significance of Peter’s initial conduct writes, “The significance of the act lay in the fact that he thereby exposed himself to the liability of eating food forbidden by the O.T. law of clean and unclean foods (Lev. chap. 11), and thus in effect declared it not binding upon him,” (Burton, *Galatians*, p. 104).

In the mind of a 1st century Jew, such freedom from OT dietary laws as well as eating unclean foods with Gentiles was unthinkable. This is why Peter’s conduct was such a monumental statement regarding the freedom of the gospel, which Paul was advocating and defending in this letter (Gal. 5:1).

However, because of his gradual withdrawal and separation from Gentile believers, his conduct contradicted the truth of the gospel. Peter’s conduct appeared to endorse the false gospel of the circumcision party. His behavior appeared to suggest that the law was binding upon them for justification.

This then is why Paul confronted Peter so fervently and publicly. Peter sinned publicly. As a leader in the church his actions had ripple effects from Antioch all the way back to Jerusalem. As the leading apostle, Peter’s conduct posed a serious threat to the unity of the church and was a grievous contradiction of the truth of the gospel. Thus, in the troubled minds (Gal. 1:7) of the Galatians, significant questions were raised:

Can a Jew and Gentile sit down together and share a common meal together? Are Gentile and Jewish believers obligated to keep the law for justification?

When Peter first came to Antioch, his conduct answered yes to the first question and no to the second. But, after a period of time, Peter gradually began to withdraw and separate from eating meals with Gentile believers.

Paul rightly discerned (“saw” v. 14) that Peter’s conduct involved more than a disagreement over questions of customs or rituals. Therefore, for the spiritual wellbeing of believers and to preserve the truth of the gospel, Paul says that when Peter came to Antioch he opposed him to his face (c.f., Burton, *Galatians*, p. 103).

Why did Peter withdraw and create such massive disunity in the fellowship in the church in Antioch?

B. THE CAUSE, v. 12

There were two reasons for Peter’s hypocritical conduct:

1. A CIRCUMSTANTIAL REASON

When Peter first visited Antioch, he regularly enjoyed (see imperfect tense, “eating”) unrestricted table-fellowship with Paul’s Gentile converts. He ate meals with them all the time. In our day, we would say he enjoyed shrimp cocktail, lobster bisque and pig pickings!

However, he gradually began to withdraw and separate himself from the Gentile believers in Antioch because “certain men came from James,” who were members of “the circumcision party,” (2:9).

It appears from the context that James didn’t agree with or appoint these men because he had already recognized Paul’s apostleship and gospel (2:1-10) in Jerusalem. Furthermore, later on at the Jerusalem Council, James clearly states that he had not appointed these same men as official representatives (Acts 15:24). These men “claimed” to have been appointed by James and pretended to be apostolic delegates.

What was the message that these men brought to Antioch?

If they were from James, some Bible teachers suggest that the freedom Peter was enjoying among the Gentile believers in Antioch was causing problems for Jewish believers in Jerusalem. Therefore, James sent some representatives to tell Peter and the Gentile believers in Antioch to cool it (cf., Leon Morris, *Galatians*, p. 77).

F.F. Bruce surmises that the message of these men may have been something like,

“News is reaching us in Jerusalem that you are habitually practising table-fellowship with Gentiles. This is causing grave scandal to our more conservative brethren here. Not only so: it is becoming common knowledge outside the church,

so that our attempts to evangelize our fellow-Jews are being seriously hampered,” (*Galatians*, p. 130).

Even more serious, when these men arrived in Antioch, they began teaching the necessity of circumcision for salvation (cf., Acts 15:1). They also taught the necessity of keeping OT dietary laws. These laws forbid circumcised Jewish believers to eat meals with uncircumcised Gentile believers, even though the Gentile believers had believed and been baptized (Gal. 3:26-27).

Their influence was so strong Peter gradually withdrew and separated himself from eating with Gentile believers.

There is a second cause for Peter’s withdrawal from Gentile believers:

2. A HEART PROBLEM

The circumstantial cause exposed the true reason (i.e., the “heart” of the matter) why Peter withdrew and acted hypocritically. Note in v. 12, the two words Paul uses to describe Peter’s conduct.

Paul uses the same word, *separated*, in Galatians 4:17. This *separation* is exactly what the circumcision party wanted. Paul says the false brothers wanted the Galatians to separate from (eliminate contact) him so they and their false gospel would be affirmed and Paul and his gospel discredited. Peter most likely was coming under the same pressure to eliminate all contact from the Gentile believers in Antioch.

The verb, ὑποστέλλω, (drew back) was used in military matters to speak of drawing back troops in order to place them under shelter (Burton, *Galatians*, p. 107; Lightfoot, *Galatians*, p. 112).

By gradually eliminating contact from Gentile believers and pulling back, Peter was seeking to provide himself shelter. He was retreating to a place of safety and security by withdrawing.

There is significant insight here in regard to conflict and the gospel. Often in the face of conflict, people seek security and safety by withdrawing and separating. We will come back to this in a moment.

For now, we want to ask: What motivated Peter to withdraw and separate? What was the underlying heart issue? Fear!

The fear of man motivated Peter!

Paul says, “Fearing the circumcision party,” Peter drew back and separated himself.

Due to the constant, strong criticism he was receiving, Peter was perhaps fearful of losing his favored status as a Pillar in the Jerusalem Church.

“Peter it is your fault for creating all of the problems for us in Jerusalem. Your actions are seriously hampering our evangelistic efforts. Still worse, by eating with Gentiles, you are putting the leadership and believers in Jerusalem in danger.”

These men may have spoken to Peter about a group of strict, militant Jews who considered fellow Jews traitors who mingled with Gentiles. It is possible then that James and the leaders of the Jerusalem church may have felt endangered by Peter’s conduct in Antioch (Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 130). Or, it may be that Peter was fearful for his own life (see 2 Cor. 11:26 where Paul says he lived in danger of false brothers).

Whatever the case, because of the immense pressure he was under from the constant, intense criticism of the circumcision party, he gradually withdrew and separated himself from Gentile believers.

From verses 11-12, I want to point out one important and often missed implication for us.

CONCLUSION:

1. THE GOSPEL IS THE ANTIDOTE TO THE FEAR OF MAN.

The fear of man can be a paralyzing and debilitating stronghold. Proverbs 29:25 says, “The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.”

This Proverb describes a situation where fearing what people might do or think controls one’s life. A snare is a trap. Fearing people is like being in a trap (a slave). There is no freedom of movement or sense of security when you are trapped.

This was Peter’s problem. He felt trapped by the attacks, the constant criticism and unrelenting pressure being put on him by the circumcision party. He was enslaved by the fear of man.

Therefore, he was more concerned for his public perception and personal safety than for the spiritual well-being of believers in Antioch and the truth of the gospel.

Fear rather than faith gripped Peter’s heart and so he retreated like an army seeking shelter for safety. Unlike Paul in Jerusalem (2:5), the fear of man rather than the truth of the gospel controlled his thoughts and motivated his behavior.

But, listen to the second half of Proverbs 29:25, “whoever trusts in the LORD is safe,” (cf., NASB, “exalted,” NET, “set on high,” NET; this word speaks of a city “too high for capture” Deut. 2:36). The translator’s footnotes in the NET commenting on this Proverb

writes, “The image of being set on high comes from the military experience of finding a defensible position, a place of safety and security, such as a high wall or a mountain.”

Trusting in the LORD, walking in step with the truth of the gospel, sets people free. The truth of the gospel instills in believers a sense of safety and security. It places them in a position of strength and defense (cf., Rom. 8:31, 33).

The gospel replaces the fear of man with the fear of God and concern for the spiritual wellbeing of others. It produces a loving boldness instead of fearful aloofness.

All of our problems are in some shape or fashion the result of a failure to live in step with the truth of the gospel (Gal. 2:14). The challenge of sanctification and the Christian life is to learn how to live in step with the truth of the gospel (i.e., to make the gospel paramount in all things!).

Graeme Goldsworthy writes, “All the problems and imperfections that we experience are failures to be conformed to the gospel. The only remedy that the New Testament prescribes for our problems is to bring our lives to conform to the gospel,” (*Preaching the Whole Bible As Christian Scriptures*, p. 50).

We see in Paul how the truth of the gospel frees a believer from his enslavement to the fear of man. There is no need to withdraw and separate for personal safety and security. When we trust in the truth of the gospel, we experience a freedom to do what Paul did, which is to confront disagreement head on.

Ultimately, what matters is not our personal safety and security but the spiritual welfare of others (i.e., the believers in Antioch and Galatia) and the glory of God. The fear of man entraps our lives in bondage. Whereas, trusting in the truth of the gospel frees us and places us in a position of safety too high for capture!

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