

PAUL: THE SPIRITUAL ABOLITIONIST, PART II
(NOT MAN'S GOSPEL!, PART 18)

TEXT: GALATIANS 2:11-21

July 12, 2009

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

We began looking last week at 2:11-21, which is the final event Paul appeals to in a series of carefully selected episodes to prove that his gospel is “Not Man’s Gospel” (cf. 1:11).

Just as in Jerusalem, we see Paul in Antioch continuing his campaign to abolish spiritual slavery.

In 2:11-21, Paul openly rebuked the leading apostle, Peter, for his hypocritical conduct in regard to the truth of the gospel, which led Jewish believers and even Barnabas astray.

Paul’s actions were intended to confirm in the Galatian’s minds that his gospel was not man’s gospel, that Paul was not a self-appointed apostle or one who was taught and sent out by the Apostles in Jerusalem.

His public confrontation of Peter left no doubts as to the authenticity of his apostleship and the truthfulness of his gospel.

The issue Paul addresses is not a trivial quarrel about customs and cultural matters of law. The issue at stake was, “the truth of the gospel,” the fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith.

Paul was constantly on guard against false teachers who sought to distort the gospel in order to destroy the church. In Acts 20:28-32, Paul gives his farewell address to the Ephesian elders.

He emphasizes that the word of God was to be central in their ministry because it alone teaches the gospel of salvation by grace, which alone is able to build up and guarantee one’s eternal inheritance.

Because this phrase, “the truth of the gospel” speaks of the primary doctrine of the Christian faith, we need to pause briefly and consider its meaning. What does the phrase, “the truth of the gospel” mean?

To help us, consider the following comments by Martin Luther,

“The truth of the Gospel is this, that our righteousness comes by faith alone, without the works of the Law. The falsification or corruption of the Gospel is this, that we are justified by faith but not without the works of the law. The false

apostles preached the Gospel, but they did so with this condition attached to it,”
(*Luther’s Works, vol. 26, p. 88*).

The Gospel only holds out to sinners Christ alone. Christ is faith’s sole object of trust. Any amount of works introduced into the gospel distorts the gospel and introduces a false gospel (1:7).

Distortion by addition was the subtle yet damning (1:8-9) error of the false brothers. When it comes to “the truth of the gospel” we must be diligent in keeping the Law (what we are commanded to do) utterly distinct from the Gospel (what Christ has done).

Thus, throughout his ministry, Paul faithfully and uncompromisingly fought to preserve and defend the truth of the gospel in order to ensure the believer’s freedom (2:5, 14). He was a spiritual abolitionist!

In 2:11-21, Paul details for us two reactions he made in response to Peter’s contradiction of the truth of the gospel.

I. Paul Confronts Peter’s Contradiction of the Truth of the Gospel (2:11-13)

A. The Confrontation, v. 11

Paul confronted Peter because his conduct contradicted the truth of the gospel and threatened the unity of the church.

In the mind of a 1st century Jew, Peter’s initial conduct in Antioch was a monumental and staggering statement regarding the truth and freedom of the gospel. Freedom from OT dietary laws as well as eating unclean foods with Gentiles was unthinkable.

This is why Peter’s gradual change in conduct posed such a threat to the truth of the gospel and the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers. His hypocritical conduct gave the false impression that the law was binding upon men for justification.

B. The Cause, v. 12

There were two causes for Peter’s hypocritical conduct:

1. A Circumstantial Reason

Peter 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).

The second cause for Peter’s withdrawal from Gentile believers was:

2. A Heart Problem

The circumstantial cause exposed the true reason (i.e., the “heart” of the matter) why Peter withdrew and acted hypocritically. The fear of man motivated Peter to gradually withdraw and separate and the consequences were quite disastrous, which leads us to v. 13.

LESSON:

C. THE CONSEQUENCES, v. 13

Peter’s conduct was not an honest mistake nor did it occur in a vacuum. Being the leading apostle of the church, he knew better and his actions had far reaching consequences.

To truly appreciate the consequences of Peter’s actions, we need to ask and answer the following questions:

Why was Peter’s hypocrisy so inexcusable (v. 11; “stood condemned, i.e., clearly in the wrong”)? Why were the consequences of his conduct so damaging (v. 13)?

There are five reasons:

1. PETER’S VISION IN JOPPA, ACTS 10:9-16

God, through supernatural revelation, revealed to Peter the worthlessness of keeping OT dietary laws for justification. At first, the command to eat restricted foods would have been shocking to Peter since it appeared to him to be a violation of OT dietary laws.

However, verse 15 is the critical, definitive statement: What God had declared clean, Peter was not to call unclean any longer (Note: God had to tell Peter 3 times!, v. 16)!

The coming of Christ changed everything! When Christ came in the “fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4), the entire Mosaic Law had been realized and fulfilled in Him (cf. Matt. 5:17).

Jesus ushered in a new age where it was no longer Moses on Mt. Sinai but rather Christ on Calvary that guides the believer (cf., Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible*, pp. 159-160)!

So, for example, when Paul exhorts the Ephesians to forsake sin and pursue holiness, he doesn’t direct them to the Mosaic Law. Rather, he points them to the gospel and reminds them, “that is not the way you learned Christ,” (Eph. 4:20).

In Colossians 2:16-17, when the Colossians were being pressured to keep certain ceremonial laws, Paul writes, “¹⁶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷ *These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ,*” (emphasis mine).

Peter understood these things by way of divine revelation. Therefore, he knew that issues such as eating clean and unclean foods, observing Jewish feasts and undergoing circumcision should not be a barrier for fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers (cf. Gal. 3:28) and they certainly were not required for one's justification.

2. PETER'S EXPERIENCE WITH CORNELIUS, ACTS 10:17-48

As a result of this vision, Peter gladly visited the household of Cornelius and proclaimed a circumcision-free gospel acknowledging his understanding that God shows no partiality (Acts 10:34 [cf. Gal. 2:6]). Thus, he preached the "good news of peace through Jesus Christ" for Jew as well as Gentile (10:36).

Peter taught that the gospel calls for faith alone in Christ alone for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:43). Having proclaimed "the truth of the gospel" to the Gentiles, Luke reports that Peter witnessed the Holy Spirit fall on all who heard and he baptized them all (Acts 10:47-48).

The fact that none of these Gentile believers had followed any Mosaic Laws (e.g., dietary, circumcision, etc...) before receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit was immensely significant.

After these Gentiles had come to trust in Christ, they asked Peter to remain with them for a brief period of time. During this time, Peter no doubt enjoyed unrestricted table-fellowship with uncircumcised, justified Gentile believers (cf. Acts 10:28- quite a remarkable turnabout).

3. PETER'S DEFENSE IN JERUSALEM, ACTS 11:1-18

After his ministry with Cornelius in Caesarea, Peter went up to Jerusalem because the apostles and brothers throughout Judea had received word of the great work of God through Peter among the Gentiles (Acts 11:1).

When Peter arrived he came under strong criticism by "the circumcision party," (Acts 11:2-3; the same group of strict, professing Jewish believers that Paul refers to in Galatians 2:12).

Just as in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:3) and in Antioch (Gal. 2:12), these false teachers insisted that if Gentiles wanted to become Christians, they had to become Jewish, which meant they had to be circumcised and keep OT food laws.

The important point to note is that in response, Peter faithfully defended his actions and the truth of the gospel over against the circumcision party's strong criticism and unrelenting pressure (Acts 11:4-18). Peter reasoned, "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way," (Acts 11:17)? This is exactly what Peter was doing in Antioch, standing in God's way!

4. PETER'S AGREEMENT WITH PAUL IN JERUSALEM, GAL. 2:1-10

When Paul went up a second time to Jerusalem, Peter, James and John gave him the right hand of fellowship (2:1-10). The so-called "Pillars" and Paul enjoyed undivided, undisputed agreement regarding "the truth of the gospel," (2:5, 9). And so by his conduct (i.e., the right hand of fellowship), Peter clearly and publicly recognized and affirmed Paul's apostolic office and gospel.

There is one final reason why Peter's conduct was so inexcusable.

5. PETER'S JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE, GAL. 2:14-16

Peter had been taught the doctrine of justification by faith alone from Jesus for three years. Moreover, he not only knew the fundamental blessing of the gospel but, as a Jew, had also experienced it!

Yet, Paul rightly discerned (v. 14, "saw") that Peter's conduct threatened the truth of the gospel because it implied that Gentile believers had to "live like Jews" (i.e., keep dietary laws, be circumcised, observe Jewish holidays and feasts) to be justified before God.

Paul, therefore, in vv. 14-16, reasons with Peter and reminds him of the truth of the gospel. It is abundantly clear that Peter, of all people, the leading Apostle, knew better!

He had received direct revelation from God concerning the truth of the gospel. He had proclaimed a circumcision-free gospel to Gentiles. He witnessed first hand the salvation of uncircumcised Gentiles. He had previously defended the truth of the gospel against the circumcision party. He publicly affirmed Paul's circumcision-free gospel in Jerusalem with the other Apostles. And, as a Jew, he was justified by grace through faith in Christ alone. Peter knew better!

With this background, we can understand more fully why Paul says Peter stood condemned (i.e., clearly in the wrong) and why his conduct was so glaringly hypocritical and destructive to the church.

As we continue working our way through this section of Galatians, there are several important implications from vv. 11-13 that we need to take note of.

CONCLUSION:

Last week, we learned that:

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

Second, we see:

2. THE GOSPEL DEMANDS UNYIELDING FAITHFULNESS IN OUR CONFESSION AND CONDUCT.

As we have noted, Paul's confrontation of Peter was not over a trivial matter of secondary importance.

"The truth of the gospel" (justification by grace through faith in Christ alone) is the principal truth upon which the church (and believer) stands or falls.

One of the things we learn from Paul's example is that in matters of primary importance of the Christian faith, we must remain unyielding, regardless of the person(s) involved.

Martin Luther wrote, "On this issue we must not do anything out of insincerity or yield submission to anyone if we want to keep the truth of the Gospel and the faith sound..." (*Luther's Works, vol. 26, p. 113*).

If Paul had yielded to Peter and failed to confront him the consequences would have been disastrous. Again Luther notes,

"He (Peter-J.F.) knew the doctrine of justification better than we do. And yet how easily he could have been responsible for such a terrible ruin by his deed and example if Paul had not opposed him! All the Gentiles would have fallen away from the preaching of Paul and would thus have lost the Gospel and Christ Himself. And this would all have happened with the appearance of holiness. For they could have said: "Paul, until now you have been teaching us that we must be justified by grace alone, without the Law. Now you see Peter doing the very opposite, for he abstains from foods prohibited by the Law. Thus he teaches us that we cannot be saved unless we undergo circumcision and observe the Law," (*Luther's Works, vol. 26, p. 112*).

Regardless of Peter's position and prestige (cf. 2:9, "Pillar"), Paul remained unyielding. Paul's unyielding, public confrontation of Peter raises an important question:

Why did Paul confront Peter publicly instead of privately?

A. PETER HELD A PRESTIGIOUS, PUBLIC POSITION, WHICH YIELDED GREAT INFLUENCE IN THE CHURCH.

James Boice notes,

"If Peter had been a lesser man or less prominent, the defection might have been less serious. But this was Peter, the pillar apostle, the companion of the Lord during his earthly ministry! What Peter did moved others. It is obvious that any Christian must give heed to his actions and the greater the position or responsibility, the more important those actions become," (*EBC, "Galatians," p. 446*).

This is the principle: The more important one's position of responsibility, the greater the consequences of one's actions.

- B. PETER'S SIN WAS PUBLIC AND THE CONSEQUENCES WERE ADVERSELY INFLUENCING THE ENTIRE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH (GAL. 2:13; CF., 1 TIM. 5:20).

Peter's hypocrisy brought great confusion and trouble into the believer's minds in Antioch.

His conduct communicated an evil message: "If you eat you sin. If you abstain, you are righteous."

This echoed the same damning message of the circumcision party, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved," (Acts 15:1).

Therefore, the believers in Antioch reasoned,

"Peter no longer eats food forbidden by the Law. Since he is the leading apostle, he must know better than us, otherwise he would not have stopped eating with us. Therefore, whoever eats foods forbidden by the Law breaks the law and sins. On the other hand, whoever abstains like Peter obeys the law and is holy and righteous. Right?"

If Paul had not confronted Peter in the manner in which he did, both Jewish and Gentile believers in Antioch would have been driven back under the suffocating, cursing demands of the law (Gal. 3:10; 5:1-4). Freeman would have been turned into slaves.

If righteousness were gained through the works of the law (i.e., avoiding certain foods, circumcision, etc...), this would have been in effect to deny that Christ had come (Gal. 4:4-5). Righteousness gained by works of the law implies that Jesus' atoning death was pointless (2:21).

Therefore, Paul confronted Peter publicly to preserve the truth of the gospel and to protect the spiritual wellbeing of the church (2:5).

It was precisely because Paul understood the powerful influence of Peter's prestige and how it threatened the truth of the gospel, that he ignored Peter's prestige and confronted him (cf., *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, p. 106).

Martin Luther writes,

"For what is Peter? What is Paul? What is an angel from heaven? What is all creation in comparison with the doctrine of justification? Therefore if you see this threatened or endangered, do not be afraid to stand up against Peter or an angel from heaven. For this cannot be praised highly enough....In fact, what are all the

creatures in comparison with Him? Like a drop of water in comparison with the entire ocean! Then why should I defer to Peter, who is only a little drop, and ignore God, who is the entire ocean? Therefore let the drop yield submission to the ocean, and let Peter yield to God,” (*Luther’s Works, vol. 26, pp. 106-107*).

May the Lord grant us the same grace as He did Paul so that we yield to God rather than man (Gal. 2:5, 11) and submit to God rather than stand in His way (Acts 11:17). By His grace, may we always seek to faithfully and unyieldingly uphold the truth of the gospel.

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