



good shepherd
presbyterian church

Grace on Trial

Galatians 2

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Last week we began Galatians with a simple illustration to help understand what is going on: wooden nickels! Out of a personal encounter with the risen Christ, Paul has been charged with taking the Good News of God's grace to the Gentile or non-Jewish world. And grace is not just part of the message; it IS the message. Jesus has fulfilled the requirements of God's Law on behalf of those who could not and has fulfilled the promise God made to Abraham to not only bless his descendants but all the nations of the world. And Paul is concerned that those who are already Christian, particularly Jewish Christians, not accept a version of the Gospel that is anything less than the real deal. No wooden nickels!

In today's text in Galatians 2 we see Paul's concern played out in two main interactions. The first is with the Jewish Christian leadership in Jerusalem, that is, the Apostles like Peter and James. The second interaction is with Peter, who on a particular occasion did not act in accordance with the Gospel of Grace. I want to look with you at Paul's approach and message in both interactions, then consider application for us today.

Unity of the Spirit (vv.1-10)

Last week I mentioned that Galatians shows us Paul acting out some of the theology he writes about elsewhere. In Ephesians he writes about "being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (4:3) This seems to be exactly what he was describing in the first half of Galatians 2. Some fourteen years had passed since his first visit to see Peter and James (described in ch. 1). In the intervening time he has been

traveling through the Gentile/Greek world sharing the message about Jesus Christ. But he comes again to Jerusalem with a Gentile Christian named Titus to meet privately with the Jerusalem Christian leadership, including Peter, James, and John.

Paul made it clear in chapter one that he does not need approval from the other Apostles for what he is teaching and doing because Jesus revealed the message and mission to him directly. Yet he does not disregard the other Apostles because he also understands the importance of unity. The whole letter of Ephesians is centered around the theme of unity. And we see it played out in these meetings with the Jerusalem Apostles. In verse two he writes about this private meeting that it was “for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain.”

While this sounds like Paul might be doubting his mission and message, he was not, as the subsequent verses make clear. Rather, he wanted to make sure that he and the other Apostolic leaders were unified because there were some factions emerging in the early Jewish Christian community that were anti-Gentile. Paul did not want this faction undermining the Christian movement whether in Jerusalem or beyond. In his *Message* translation-paraphrase of v. 3, Eugene Peterson draws out the underlying issue for Paul:

At that time I placed before them exactly what I was preaching to the non-Jews. I did this in private with the leaders, those held in esteem by the church, so that our concern would not become a controversial public issue, marred by ethnic tensions, exposing my years of work to denigration and endangering my present ministry.

There were those in the early Jewish Christian community that wanted to insist on Gentile converts adhering to the Torah in order to be accepted in the Christian community. It was “follow Jesus AND keep the Torah” - and this specifically was brought to bear over the issue of circumcision. They were trying to influence the Apostles in this direction. In fact, in verse 4 our translation uses words like “secretly brought in” and “sneaked in to spy.”

Nonetheless, Paul and the Jerusalem leadership are able to agree on the MESSAGE and MISSION of the Gospel - that it is by the grace of God in Christ and for both Jew and Gentile, with Paul specially sent to the Gentile world. Titus, an uncircumcised Gentile Greek Christian is welcomed as a brother and not required to be circumcised (v.3). The only request of the Jerusalem leadership was to “remember the poor” - and Paul was eager to do the same. (v.10)

Faith Alone (vv.11-21)

In Romans, Paul explains the theology of grace:

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested... through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. (3:21-24)

In Galatians 2:11-21 there is a lot going on. It is confusing and oh so human, involving our favorite impulsive disciple, Peter.

Peter was a part of the leadership in Jerusalem that we just talked about that agreed with the message of grace and the mission to Jew and Gentile. He met with Paul and accepted the uncircumcised Titus as a brother in Christ. Peter had also had a vision from the Lord regarding Law and Grace. Acts 10 records his vision, in which God authorizes him to eat (non-kosher) food with Gentiles. Peter challenges the Lord saying that he has kept the Law and “never eaten anything unholy and unclean.” The Lord says, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.”

From this vision Peter (and other Jewish Christians) start to practice freedom around eating with Gentiles and Paul describes this in Galatians 2: Peter “used to eat with the Gentiles” (v.11). But then he was influenced by the arrival of some who did not approve of this mixing with the Gentiles. It was this same group that Paul was concerned with in the first part of the chapter, named here as “the party of circumcision.” (v.12) Whether or not they had the claimed endorsement from James is

debated, but regardless, they influenced Peter, other Jewish Christians present, and even Barnabas.

Paul did not stand for it. What of unity? I think of the centuries-old slogan: *in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity*. There was nothing more essential and central to Christian faith than understanding and living out the grace at the heart of it. Peter was not just going against Paul, he was going against his own understanding of the Gospel and against the very saving work of Jesus. So to not confront this counterfeit movement would have gone against the unity of the Spirit. So Paul challenged Peter and the others: “...even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law.” (v.16)

I don't know if Peter was deceived, peer-pressured, confused, or what, but he got off-track and Paul called him back to the heart of the Gospel, summarized so well in v.20:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

Jesus Christ is our first and only allegiance, our only hope, our Lord, and our Savior. If there is any other salvation or any other righteousness, then “Christ died needlessly” (v.21). What does Christ teach us? Where does Christ lead us?

Peter, Paul, or Party?

Galatians is always useful in considering the gift of grace and our tendency towards legalism, rules we can understand and think we can use to measure goodness and godliness. But Galatians takes on an extra measure of urgency and practicality in this time when race, religion, and politics are such dominant themes in our lives and society. All three were in play in Galatians. Was there an advantage to being Jew or Gentile? What was the heart of the Christian religion, these followers of Jesus

Christ? What of this “party of circumcision” trying to gain influence in the church and shape it in their own image?

We face similar questions today. Are there advantages and disadvantages of race? Should there be? What is at the heart of Christian faith? How does political affiliation shape and distort our understanding of faith and impact our faith community?

I can recognize at least three ways we answer such questions.

We can answer as PAUL, holding fast to the faith handed down, diligent in subjecting all our experience, allegiances, and plans to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We can diligently study God’s Word, faithfully pray for discernment and guidance from the Holy Spirit, and submit our lives to Christ. The Protestant Reformers had the slogan “reforming and always being reformed according to God’s Word.” We aren’t just called to submit ourselves once to Christ and His Word, but to do so regularly that we might be sharpened, shaped, and re-formed more and more into God’s will. This is what I aspire to do.

We can answer by PARTY, letting worldly allegiances drive our understanding of faith as it did for the “party of circumcision.” It was so important to maintain their racial distinctive that they sought to re-define the early Christian church to make that a pillar of faith. Though they made an appeal to religion to justify their platform they did not understand the scriptures in their context and required something that God did not. This is the wooden nickel or worse.

Most of us are likely most like PETER, getting it right much of the time and agreeing with our mind and mouth to what is essential. But we are also easily influenced by people and voices around us, particularly if they are loud and nearby. We can go along with something that doesn’t stand up to close examination or even our own deepest convictions. It’s easy to get drawn into sharing an ill-conceived or completely false chain letter or internet mem without realizing the harm we are propagating. It’s hard for one hour of church or a 10-minute morning devotion to speak clearly through hours and hours and hours of cable news or Facebook surfing. And

yet, I know Peter got to the other side of this. Did he argue with Paul? Did he thank him for helping him see clearly? I don't know; but I know that the party of circumcision did not win the day. Peter was part of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 that clearly spoke against the circumcision party and declared: "We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as [the Gentiles] also are." (Acts 15:11)

There is also a fourth person in these stories. It is TITUS and the other Gentiles. What was it like for him to be present as Paul met with the first leaders about whether or not his salvation was complete? What was it like for those Gentile Christians in Antioch who enjoyed the presence and support of Peter as they ate together, but then found themselves rejected and judged when he and the other Jewish Christians changed their behavior?

It is very easy to take this scripture and apply it to other people: "Do they think they are a Paul? Clearly they are a Peter or driven by party!" But I'd challenge you to read and re-read this chapter for yourself this week. Pray through it, asking God to open your eyes to your own inconsistencies and allegiances. I get it... I know people who need to do this, but Lord, let it begin with me. Most days I am a Peter, enthusiastic and willing, but making mistakes and not seeing what I don't see. Give me a Paul to sharpen and hone me, and the humility to welcome the correction and re-direction. Help me lay aside any allegiance to party or person that is not to Christ alone. Amen.