

Galatians: No Other Gospel

Part 4. Stranding Firm

Today, we delve into one of the more intense and revealing sections in Paul's letter to the Galatians: Galatians 2:11-21. In this passage, Paul recounts a confrontation with Peter in Antioch, addressing issues of hypocrisy and the truth of the gospel. This passage is crucial for understanding the full implications of the gospel for both Jewish and Gentile believers, and it challenges us to examine our own lives for consistency and faithfulness to the gospel.

Galatians 2:11-21 *“When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?”*

We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may 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 seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker. For through the law, I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

1. The Confrontation in Antioch (Verses 11-14)

Peter's Hypocrisy

Paul opposes Peter to his face because Peter was clearly wrong. Before certain men came, Peter used to eat with the Gentiles. However, when these men arrived, Peter began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. This behavior was hypocritical because Peter had previously lived like a Gentile and enjoyed fellowship with them. Peter's actions reflect a deeper issue of fear and inconsistency. His withdrawal from eating with the Gentiles was driven by a fear of criticism from those who insisted on adhering to Jewish customs. This fear led him to compromise the truth of the gospel, which proclaims the unity of all believers in Christ, regardless of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

The Influence on Others

Peter's hypocrisy did not go unnoticed. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray. This influence underscores the responsibility of leaders to act consistently with the truth of the gospel, as their actions can lead others astray. Peter's behavior created division and confusion within the community, undermining the message of the gospel.

The impact of Peter's actions on others highlights the communal nature of the Christian faith. Our behavior affects those around us, especially those who look up to us for guidance and direction. When leaders compromise on the truth of the gospel, it can lead to widespread confusion and division within the church. This incident serves as a sobering reminder of the importance of integrity and consistency in our witness.

Paul's Public Rebuke

When Paul saw that Peter and the others were not acting in line with the truth of the true gospel, he confronted Peter publicly. Paul's rebuke was direct and unambiguous: *"You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"* This public confrontation was necessary to address the public nature of Peter's actions and their impact on the community.

Paul's willingness to confront Peter publicly demonstrates his commitment to the truth of the gospel and his considerable courage to address issues of hypocrisy, even when it involves a fellow apostle. This confrontation highlights the importance of accountability within the Christian community. When leaders or members of the church deviate from the truth of the gospel, it is essential to address these issues openly and honestly to preserve the integrity of the message.

2. Justification by Faith, Not by Works (Verses 15-16)

Paul then transitions from recounting the confrontation to expounding on the doctrine of justification by faith.

The Shared Understanding of Jewish Christians

Paul begins by stating that *"we who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ."* This shared understanding among Jewish Christians highlights their understanding that adherence to the law cannot justify anyone. Justification, or being declared righteous before God, comes by grace and is embraced through faith in Jesus Christ. This statement reflects a fundamental truth of the gospel that transcends cultural and religious boundaries. It emphasizes that justification is based solely on faith in Christ, not on our efforts or adherence to religious laws. This truth was revolutionary in Paul's time and remains foundational for our understanding of salvation today.

Personal Faith in Christ

Paul continues, *"So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may 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."* Paul and other Jewish Christians had placed their faith in Christ, recognizing that justification could not be achieved through the law. This personal faith in Christ is essential for salvation. The personal nature of faith underscores the individual response required for salvation to be experienced. Each person must place their trust in Christ, recognizing their inability to achieve righteousness through their efforts. This faith is a personal commitment to rely on Christ's finished work for salvation, leading to a transformed life in Him.

The Universal Application

Paul's emphasis on justification by faith, not by works, applies universally to all believers, both Jews and Gentiles. The law's inability to justify highlights the need for a saviour and the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. This doctrine is central to the gospel and must be upheld without compromise.

The universal application of justification by faith underscores the inclusivity of the gospel. It breaks down barriers between different groups, emphasizing that all people, regardless of their background, can be justified through faith in Christ. This truth challenges us to embrace the unity and diversity within the body of Christ, recognizing that we are all equal recipients of God's grace.

3. Addressing Potential Misunderstandings (Verses 17-18)

Paul anticipates potential misunderstandings about justification by faith and addresses them directly.

Does Justification by Faith Promote Sin?

Paul raises a rhetorical question: *"But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not!"* This question addresses the concern that justification by faith might lead to moral slackness or encourage sinful behavior. Paul emphatically denies this notion, affirming that Christ does not promote sin. This concern reflects a misunderstanding of the gospel's transformative power. Justification by faith does not lead to a permissive attitude towards sin; rather, it leads to a transformed life characterized by holiness and obedience to God. Paul's emphatic denial underscores the gospel's call to live in a manner worthy of our calling in Christ.

Rebuilding What Was Destroyed

Paul explains, *"If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker."* This statement highlights the inconsistency of returning to the law after embracing the gospel of grace. Rebuilding the law as a means of justification undermines the gospel and makes one a lawbreaker. Paul's argument underscores the futility of relying on the law for righteousness. This illustration emphasizes the need for consistency in our understanding and application of the gospel. Once we have embraced the truth of justification by faith, we cannot revert to legalistic practices without contradicting the gospel. This consistency is crucial for maintaining the integrity of our faith and witness.

The Law and the Gospel

Paul's distinction between the law and the gospel is critical for understanding the nature of salvation. The law reveals our sin and our need for a saviour, but it cannot save us. The gospel, on the other hand, offers the solution to our sin through the finished work of Christ. This distinction must be maintained to preserve the purity of the gospel message. Understanding the relationship between the law and the gospel is essential for a balanced and biblical view of salvation. The law serves an important purpose in revealing our need for a saviour, but it's the gospel that provides the remedy. This understanding helps us to appreciate the full scope of God's redemptive plan and the centrality of Christ's sacrifice.

4. Living by Faith in the Son of God (Verses 19-21)

Paul concludes this section by describing the transformative implications of the gospel for his own life.

Dying to the Law

Paul declares, *"For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God."* This statement reflects Paul's recognition that the law's demands have been fully met in Christ. Through his union with Christ in His death, Paul has died to the law's condemnation and power, freeing him to live for God. Dying to the law signifies a radical shift in our relationship with God. It means that we are no longer bound by the law's demands and condemnation but are free to live in the grace and power of the gospel. This freedom is not an excuse for sin but a call to live in obedience and devotion to God, empowered by His Spirit.

Crucified with Christ

Paul continues with one of the most profound statements in Scripture: *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”* This declaration encapsulates the essence of the Christian life - union with Christ in His death and resurrection. Being crucified with Christ signifies the end of our old, sinful nature and the beginning of a new life in Christ. It means that His life and power now reside in us, enabling us to live a life of faith and obedience. Paul’s personal testimony underscores the transformative power of the gospel and the intimate relationship we have with Christ.

Living by Faith

Paul’s statement that he lives by faith in the Son of God emphasizes the ongoing nature of the Christian life. Faith is not a one-time event but a continuous trust and reliance on Christ. This faith is rooted in the love of Christ, who gave Himself for us. Understanding and experiencing Christ’s love is the foundation of our faith and motivates our obedience. Living by faith in the Son of God involves daily dependence on His grace and power. It means trusting in His promises, following His guidance, and living in the reality of His presence. This life of faith is characterized by a deep, personal relationship with Christ, grounded in His sacrificial love for us.

The Grace of God

Paul concludes, *“I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”* This final statement reinforces the absolute necessity of grace for salvation. Any attempt to achieve righteousness through the law nullifies the grace of God and undermines the purpose of Christ’s death. The grace of God is the foundation of our salvation and the basis of our relationship with Him. It is by grace that we are saved, sustained, and empowered to live the Christian life. Understanding the grace of God is crucial for our spiritual growth and our daily walk with Christ. It humbles us, reminding us that our salvation is entirely the work of God’s mercy and love, and it empowers us to live in a way that honors Him.

5. Practical Applications for Our Lives

As we reflect on Galatians 2:11-21, several practical applications emerge for our lives today.

Stand Firm in the Truth of the Gospel

Paul’s confrontation with Peter underscores the importance of standing firm in the truth of the gospel. We must be vigilant in guarding the purity of the gospel message and be willing to confront any distortions or compromises. This requires a deep understanding of the gospel and a commitment to its truth. In our own lives, we can apply this by studying the Scriptures diligently, embracing sound teaching, and being part of a community of faith that upholds the truth of the gospel. When we encounter false teachings or behaviors that contradict the gospel, we should address them with love and firmness, just as Paul did.

Avoid Hypocrisy and Live Consistently

Peter’s hypocrisy serves as a warning against living inconsistently with the gospel. Our actions must align with our beliefs, and we should strive to live out the truth of the gospel in every aspect of our lives. This includes our interactions with others, our decisions, and our daily conduct. Living consistently with the gospel means being honest, transparent, and humble. It means acknowledging our failures and seeking God’s grace to grow in righteousness. By living authentically, we bear witness to the transformative power of the gospel and inspire others to follow Christ with integrity.

Embrace Justification by Faith

Paul's teaching on justification by faith is a foundational truth that we must embrace fully. Our righteousness before God is not based on our works or adherence to the law but on our faith in Jesus Christ. This truth frees us from the burden of legalism and empowers us to live in the grace and freedom of the gospel.

To embrace justification by faith, we must constantly remind ourselves of the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice and the completeness of our salvation in Him. We should reject any attempts to earn God's favour through our efforts and instead rest in the finished work of Christ. This understanding should lead us to live with gratitude, humility, and a deep sense of security in God's love.

Live by Faith in the Son of God

Paul's declaration that he lives by faith in the Son of God who loved him and gave Himself for him is a powerful reminder of the intimate relationship we have with Christ. Living by faith means trusting in Christ's presence, guidance, and power in our daily lives.

We can live by faith by maintaining a close relationship with Christ through prayer, worship, and the study of His Word. By seeking His will in our decisions and relying on His strength in our challenges, we demonstrate our trust in Him. This daily dependence on Christ transforms our lives and enables us to reflect His love and grace to others.

Remember the Grace of God

Paul's emphasis on not setting aside the grace of God calls us to continually remember and rely on God's grace. Grace is the foundation of our salvation and the source of our strength for living the Christian life. We must never lose sight of the grace that has saved us and continues to sustain us. Remembering the grace of God involves regularly reflecting on the gospel, expressing gratitude for God's unmerited favor, and extending grace to others. It means recognizing that our worth and identity are found in Christ alone and living in the freedom and joy that His grace provides.

Conclusion

As we conclude our reflection on Galatians 2:11-21, we are reminded of the centrality of the gospel and the importance of living consistently with its truth. Paul's confrontation with Peter challenges us to stand firm in the gospel, avoid hypocrisy, and embrace justification by faith. His personal testimony of living by faith in the Son of God inspires us to cultivate a deep, personal relationship with Christ and rely on His grace daily. Let me close this sermon with a story.

In a small town nestled in the mountains, there was a bridge that spanned a large, rushing river. This bridge was not just any bridge; it was the only way for the town's residents to reach the nearby city where they worked, shopped, and visited doctors. For generations, this bridge had stood firm against all sorts of weather: storms, floods, and heavy snows. It was a lifeline for the community.

One spring, the river swelled more than it had in decades, and the old bridge was put to a severe test. Logs and debris hammered against its structure day and night. Watching from the riverbanks, the townspeople were anxious; they feared the bridge would give way under the relentless force of the river. During these days, an engineer from the city visited to inspect the bridge. After a thorough check, he gathered the townsfolk to share his findings. He explained how the bridge was built on deep, strong foundations, designed to withstand even the harshest conditions. Despite its age and the ferocity of the river, the bridge was safe. It was designed to stand firm.

This bridge is much like our faith. In Galatians 2:11-21, we see a vivid example of standing firm in the faith through the confrontation between Paul and Peter. Peter, swayed by pressure from certain groups, began to withdraw and separate himself from the Gentile believers. Paul, recognizing the danger of this hypocrisy to the truth of the gospel, confronted Peter publicly. He stood firm not for personal pride but for the truth of the gospel which proclaims that both Jew and Gentile are justified by faith in Christ, not by observing the law.

Like the bridge, Peter's actions could have weakened the very fabric of the church's unity and the purity of the gospel, just as a damaged bridge threatens the safety and well-being of a town. Paul's confrontation was about more than correcting a peer; it was a bold stand to protect the integrity of the gospel, reinforcing the deep, strong foundations of our faith.

When we face pressures - from society, from within our own circles, or even from within ourselves - to compromise on our beliefs or to live in a way that contradicts the truth of the gospel, we must remember the example of Paul. We are called to stand firm, not on our own strength but on the foundation that is Christ Jesus. Just like the town's bridge, we are built on something unshakeable, something that can withstand any storm or flood.

So let us take heart and stand firm. Let the truth of the gospel be the solid ground under our feet, and let our lives reflect that stability to the world around us, just as surely as that bridge continues to connect the townspeople to everything they need.