

The Book of Galatians

Lesson 4: Justified by Faith, Not Works of the Law -- Galatians 2:11-21

Picture a shared table in Antioch. Jewish believers and Gentile believers are eating together, passing the bread, laughing at the same jokes, one family in Christ. For centuries a wall had stood between these people, and the gospel had knocked it flat. Peter himself, the apostle to the Jews, is right there at the table, enjoying the company of his Gentile brothers and sisters as if the old divisions had never existed. And they hadn't, not anymore.

Then the door opens. A group arrives from Jerusalem, men associated with the circumcision party, and something in Peter shrinks. Quietly, he gets up and moves away from the Gentile table. The other Jewish believers notice and follow him. Even Barnabas, Paul's trusted partner, drifts away. In a matter of minutes, the wall the gospel had demolished is being rebuilt, brick by anxious brick, all because of who might be watching.

Paul sees exactly what is happening, and he will not let it stand. This is not a minor question of table manners. Peter's feet are out of step with the truth of the gospel, and his fear is preaching a sermon louder than his words: that maybe Gentile believers are second-class after all, that maybe you really do need the law to belong. So Paul confronts Peter to his face, and out of that confrontation comes one of the most glorious passages in all of Scripture.

Listen to where it lands. Paul says he has been crucified with Christ, that he no longer lives but Christ lives in him, that the life he now lives he lives by faith in the Son of God who loved him and gave himself for him. This is the beating heart of the gospel. We are not justified by our performance but by Christ's, received through a living faith that unites us to him. As we read, let the wonder of it sink in: the Son of God loved you, and gave himself for you.

Group Discussion: Peter knew the truth but his feet would not follow it; his conduct was "not in step with the truth of the gospel" (2:14). Why is it possible to believe the right things and still deny them by how we act, and where does the church most need its walk to catch up with its talk?

Personal Reflection: Paul says, "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" (2:20). How would your ordinary day look different if you truly lived as one personally loved by Christ and crucified with him?

Read Galatians 2:11-21

Study Questions

1. Paul "opposed Cephas to his face, because he stood condemned," since his conduct "was not in step with the truth of the gospel" (2:11-14). What exactly did Peter do, and why was

his withdrawal from the Gentile believers a betrayal of the gospel rather than merely an awkward social lapse?

2. Peter acted against what he knew to be true because he feared the circumcision party (2:12). Where does the fear of what others will think cause you to act against your own convictions, and what does that fear reveal about where you are looking for approval?
3. Paul states the heart of the matter: “a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16). What does it mean to be justified before God, and why can the works of the law never accomplish it?
4. Paul refuses to “rebuild what I tore down” (2:18), the old system of trying to be right with God by law-keeping. In what ways are you still tempted to rebuild a system of earning, trying to justify yourself by your performance, your record, or your religious effort?
5. Paul says, “through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God” (2:19). What does it mean to have died to the law as a way of justification, and how does that death actually set us free to truly live to God?
6. Paul declares, “I have been crucified with Christ” (2:20). What part of your old self, the self that wants to run its own life or earn its own standing, is Jesus calling you to take to the cross with him?
7. Paul continues, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (2:20). What is this union with Christ that Paul describes, and how should the truth that Christ lives in the believer reshape our identity and our everyday choices?
8. Paul grounds his whole life in the love of Christ, “who loved me and gave himself for me” (2:20). How does knowing that the Son of God loved you personally and gave himself for you change the way you see yourself and the way you face your day?
9. Paul insists, “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose” (2:21), having said we are justified “through faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16). How do we hold firmly that we are justified by grace through faith and not by the works of the law, while still affirming that the faith which justifies is a living, obedient faith that believes, repents, confesses Christ, and is baptized into him, so that we fall into neither legalism nor a bare faith only?
10. Look back across the whole passage. Paul’s entire life had become a response to a Savior who loved him and gave himself for him. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you, this week, to stop trying to justify yourself and instead live by faith in the Son of God who loves you.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Romans 3:21–28, justification by faith apart from the works of the law; Romans 6:1–7, being crucified with Christ and baptized into his death; Philippians 3:8–9, a righteousness that comes from God and depends on faith; Ephesians 2:8–10, saved by grace

through faith and created for good works; Titus 3:4-7, saved by God's mercy through the washing of regeneration.