

## Galatians 2:11-21

<sup>11</sup>But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly wrong. <sup>12</sup>For before some people came from James, he ate with the Gentiles. But when those people came, he drew back and separated himself, because he feared those from the circumcision group. <sup>13</sup>And the rest of the Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. <sup>14</sup>But when I saw that they were not acting according to the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of all of them, “If you, a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, why do you compel the Gentiles to live like the Jews?”

<sup>15</sup>“We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners. <sup>16</sup>We know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. So we also believed in Christ Jesus that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. <sup>17</sup>But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves were also found to be sinners, then is Christ a servant of sin? Certainly not!

<sup>18</sup>“In fact, if I build up again those things that I destroyed, I bring on myself the judgment of being a lawbreaker. <sup>19</sup>Indeed, through the law I died to the law that I might live for God. <sup>20</sup>I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I am now living in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. <sup>21</sup>I do not regard the grace of God as nothing. As a matter of fact, if righteousness is through the law, then Christ died for nothing!”

## Faith Alone

### I.

Some years before the time of the events recorded in this Letter from Paul to the Galatians, the Apostle Peter had a vision. It was enlightening.

In the vision, recorded in Acts 10:9ff, Peter saw all kinds of animals being let down from heaven in a sheet. Among the animals were some that were considered “unclean” according to the Jewish Ceremonial Law which told Jewish people how to worship. In his vision, Peter was told to eat some of these unclean animals. Being a good Jew, Peter refused. God told him in the vision: “What God has made clean, you must not continue to call unclean” (Acts 10:15, EHV). God was setting Peter up to be ready to bring the gospel message to a Gentile named Cornelius. Peter said to Cornelius and his friends: “You understand how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to associate with or visit anyone who is not a Jew. But God showed me that I should no longer continue to call anyone impure or unclean. <sup>29</sup> That is why I came without objection when you sent for me” (Acts 10:28-29, EHV).

It was transformative. It was a lesson Peter would never forget—it changed him.

Following his vision, Peter had understood that he, as a Jewish believer in Jesus, *could* associate with believers who were not Jewish by birth. He could freely meet with and worship with Gentiles who also believed in Jesus as the Savior. Peter happily and willingly carried on this way following that first worship service and evangelism opportunity with gentiles.

But Peter often displayed weaknesses in his life.

“When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly wrong. <sup>12</sup>For before some people came from James, he ate with the Gentiles. But when those people came, he drew back and separated himself, because he feared those from the circumcision group” (Galatians 2:11-12, EHV).

People like to be comfortable. Sometimes a person just wants to blend in with the crowd. Why rock the boat? Why stick your neck out and put yourself in danger? Why not just go along to get along? The life-changing lesson Peter had in the vision from God was easily pushed into the back seat as Peter reverted to the old ways.

The “circumcision group” was shorthand for Jewish believers who were insisting that Gentile converts to Christianity had to be circumcised, just like converts to Judaism had been required to

do in the past. The implications went even farther: those Gentile believers in Christ ought to be required to follow all the Old Testament Ceremonial Laws governing the worship of God. Those Ceremonial Laws weren't just for church festival days or weekly worship services, either, they were to govern every aspect of a believer's life.

At the impetus of the "circumcision group" Peter took things to another level. He quit associating with the Gentile believers at all. He separated himself in fear of how he might be treated by these self-important, self-righteous Jewish believers.

Peter forgot his lesson. What the "circumcision group" was insisting on was legalism. Paul understood exactly what was going on: "I saw that they were not acting according to the truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:14, EHV).

It takes a certain kind of person to go against the grain—to say things that are unpopular or will draw ire from the dominant side. Paul condemned legalism and Peter's behavior most strongly.

"When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly wrong...<sup>14</sup> I said to Cephas in front of all of them, 'If you, a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, why do you compel the Gentiles to live like the Jews?'" (Galatians 2:11, 14, EHV). Hey, Peter! Most of your life you followed the Ceremonial Law like a good Jew, without really giving much thought to it. After your vision you realized that you should treat Gentile believers like real believers. Now some imposters have come along and have convinced you to revert to your old ways, just to impress those who have misinterpreted the words of Jesus. Stop this behavior. Quit trying to force Gentile believers to follow the customs of Jewish Ceremonial Law. They don't have to worship that way...and you *know* it!

## II.

Paul said: "I saw that they were not acting according to the truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:14, EHV). The "circumcision group" had twisted the gospel. They twisted it so hard they turned it back into law. This is called legalism. They promoted this false gospel so effectively they even got Peter to join in with them, and Barnabas, too. Legalism is destructive. Legalism convinces even Christians that they can make themselves right with God.

The Barna Group has some interesting statistics about the state of Christianity in America today (<https://bit.ly/2fSerFB>). 73% of Americans identify themselves as Christian, but only about 31% are practicing Christians. Barna defines practicing Christians as those who attend church once a month or more. 73% are willing to call themselves Christian, but 55% of Americans somewhat or strongly agree that doing good works will result in going to heaven. There is no breakdown of what that group of 55% includes, but I would imagine a big part of it is the 20% who say they have no religious faith at all. That means a significant percentage of those who claim to be Christian believe that good works will get them to heaven.

The push toward legalism has never stopped. It is deceptive. It is destructive. Those who push in that direction are "not acting according to the truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:14, EHV).

You dare not put demands on a Christian that are not there. Yes, God demands perfection. He said to his people through Moses: "You shall be holy, because I, the LORD your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2, EHV). Jesus showed his disciples that the command is not some passing fad, but still applies to New Testament believers, too, when he repeated it: "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48, EHV).

That is terrifying. *Everyone* admits: "nobody's perfect." But that is the law. God demands perfect obedience to his law. If you think good works are going to get you to heaven, you will have to realize that *some* good works are not enough—*all* of your works must be good to meet God's standards.

## III.

Law is not how you get to heaven. The people from the "circumcision group" were effectively pointing back at the demands of the law and legalism and insisting that was how everyone must be saved.

“I saw that they were not acting according to the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2:14, EHV). The “circumcision group” had confused Law and Gospel and had led others astray with them. They mixed and co-mingled the law and gospel until gospel was turned into law. Luther said: “Whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian” (Luther’s works, Volume 26, page 115). He said this because it can be such a difficult task—so much so that every Christian must constantly be learning how to properly distinguish God’s Law from his Gospel for the rest of our lives.

“We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners” (Galatians 2:15, EHV). Paul makes use of the terminology of the legalists. What they were trying to imply is that Gentile believers were lesser Christians than good Jewish Christians—they were in a lower category.

“We know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. So we also believed in Christ Jesus that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law” (Galatians 2:16, EHV). This passage is the heart of the whole reading.

God says “be perfect.” Honesty must admit that you are *not* perfect. “A person is not justified by the works of the law.” No one *can* be justified, or declared righteous and holy in God’s eyes, by the works of the law, because no one is able to “be perfect,” as God requires.

Jesus *did* keep the Moral Law perfectly. He did it not only for himself, but in order to act as the substitute for all imperfect people who cannot keep God’s Law and never will be able to.

“So we also believed in Christ Jesus that we might be justified by faith in Christ.” It is not and can not be works or actions that make us right with God, because we cannot be perfect. It is faith alone, in Christ Jesus alone, that makes us right with God. Jesus was the substitute. God looks at *Jesus’* behavior and sees us through Jesus-colored glasses.

“But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves were also found to be sinners, then is Christ a servant of sin? Certainly not!” (Galatians 2:17, EHV). This sounds hard to understand at first glance. Here is what Paul is saying: Believers know that we are declared righteous because of Christ. If that makes us “sinners,” as the legalists were saying, that would make Christ a servant of sin, rather than the Savior. That is certainly not possible!

Actions won’t save you. Faith alone will. Faith alone, in Christ alone. We are justified in Christ, and those who are justified in Christ are not sinners, but saints, in God’s eyes.

#### IV.

Paul had to call Peter and even Barnabas hypocrites for their move into legalism. It is a sad fact of Christian life: believers still sin. *All* believers sin. That makes all believers hypocrites. By definition a hypocrite is someone who puts on a false appearance of virtue or religion. By coming to church, you claim to be a follower of Christ. The Barna Group would call you a “practicing Christian.” Yet every day you still sin.

How can you be a follower of Christ and still sin? Every Christian still has a sinful human nature that is trying to wrest back control from your New Self. But “Through the law I died to the law that I might live for God” (Galatians 2:19, EHV).

The law reveals that each one of us is a damnable sinner. “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20, EHV). Faith trusts that what Jesus has done for you belongs to you. Salvation is yours because you are righteous. You are not righteous by what *you* have done, but by what *Jesus* has done *for* you.

“The life I am now living in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20, EHV). Your New Self now lives for Jesus. The old Sinful Self will constantly be warring against the New Self. Your New Self tries to follow the Moral Law, not because you are legalistic, thinking that you will get better standing in God’s courtroom, but because you *want* to do what is right now that Christ lives *in* you.

Live by and in the Lord Jesus for the rest of your life by faith alone. Amen.