

## Galatians 2:11-16

<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.

## Conversations

### I.

I tried to screw my face into my best “what were you thinking?” expression as I drove by in the other lane with one hand held up, palm up, trying to imply the same “what was that?” question. Yet one more time that another driver had pulled some boneheaded move that forced me to take evasive action rather than smashing up my car. But the truth is, I likely wouldn’t say or do much at all if I were face to face with that other driver. It’s really not worth the effort. When you get right down to it, there *wasn’t* an accident, even if it *was* close. Nothing bad actually happened. It just wouldn’t be worth the confrontation.

Probably most people don’t like confrontation. They might gesticulate from the safety of their cars—hopefully with appropriate hand gestures, not the nasty ones. They might even yell. But the other person is too insulated to hear their words, so it’s kind of like the tree falling in the forest—if no one is there to hear it, does it really make a sound?

While we may be averse to confrontation, sometimes it is important, even necessary. I’ve also driven by cars gesticulating wildly trying to get their attention to indicate something is wrong. Pointing up and mouthing: “Your pod is open!” They might want to know before all their vacation belongings are strewn alongside the highway.

Irritation with another driver, or even warning another driver of impending doom isn’t what we are talking about today. Confrontation about sin—actual wrongdoing—is what all of today’s readings are focused on. The Theme of the Day spoke of: The Church God wants: A Church willing to say hard things. Warning against sin is not easy. God wants the people of his church to be willing to say hard things to people when that is what is necessary to save them; that is the loving thing to do when it is a matter of eternal life and death.

In the Gospel for the day, Jesus gave instruction about how to confront a fellow believer with their sin. He said: “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his sin just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother” (Matthew 18:15, EHV). Sin is first to be confronted privately. Don’t expose the sinner to ridicule and shame because your purpose is to lead the other individual to see that his or her sin is serious and encourage repentance.

In today’s sermon text Paul was faced with a difficult situation. Cephas—otherwise known as Peter—was sinning. How was he, Paul, to handle it? Certainly a conversation was in order. “When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly wrong” (Galatians 2:11, EHV). Certainly that is in the spirit of what Jesus said; the sinner needs to know about that sin—Peter needed to be confronted.

Peter should have known. Some time before this Peter had a vision in which God showed him that the Ceremonial Law was no longer in force. The Ceremonial Law was given by God

to his Old Testament people to tell them how they were to worship. It covered more than just how a worship service might be conducted. Matters of everyday life were included as ways the people were to worship God, including what foods were appropriate to eat and which ones weren't.

God showed Peter that these restrictions—including the dietary restrictions—no longer applied to New Testament believers. All those rules looked ahead to Jesus. Jesus had now come, so the old rules didn't need to be followed to show worship to God.

God's plan of salvation was designed for both Jews and Gentiles—that is, non-Jews. Other than Jesus, there is only one kind of person in the world—sinners. Every one of them needs Jesus. Peter gladly applied what God had shown him. He worshiped with and ate with Gentile Christians happily and regularly.

Until it all changed. Paul says; “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 2:12, EHV). Some other Jewish believers moved to town. They brought with them a false understanding. They rejected what Peter had seen in his vision. They believed that *all* Christians, whether of Jewish descent or Gentiles, had to rigidly follow many of the regulations of the Ceremonial Law in order to be called Christian. One of the commands they insisted on was circumcision. They said that any male who considered himself Christian *must* become circumcised. Peter foolishly went along with their false ideas.

## II.

Remember Jesus' instruction about confronting someone about their sin? Those conversations are to be held in private. Now, the New Testament wasn't compiled yet, so Paul may or may not have known about Jesus' instructions to first go to the other person privately. But even if he did, this situation was a little bit different.

Peter's sin was not private, but very, very public. Peter's sin was not just out in the open, it was actually affecting others. Trying to add requirements from the Ceremonial Law to Christian teaching was confusing the new Gentile converts. Their misunderstanding might even cause them to lose their faith.

Paul felt he had no choice—he was forced into action. “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?’” (Galatians 2:14, EHV). Since Peter's sin was such a public problem, affecting many within the Christian church, it could not be dealt with quietly and privately. This sin affected so many that it *had* to be confronted openly.

As much as confrontation might be difficult, one-on-one conversations are much easier to have than a one-on-one conversation with an audience.

Have you ever confronted someone over a sin? I'm sure you have. Hopefully you had the conversation privately. Perhaps you scolded your child over some incorrect action. Maybe you had to confront a coworker or friend who was clearly in the wrong.

Perhaps there have even been times that the wrongdoing was so public you had to jump the order of things, as Paul did, and have a public conversation about sin.

## III.

Paul's reason to get right to the heart of the matter was simple. Everyone needed to know the truths of salvation. “We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners” (Galatians 2:15, EHV).

Paul was not mocking the Gentile believers in his public conversation with Peter. I can almost see him using air quotes around the word “sinners” as he spoke. “Sinners” was the way legalistic Jews described the Gentiles. Since Jews were God's Old Testament chosen people, they felt that they were a cut above. Those born as Gentiles were born without hope,

they thought.

But it wasn't really so.

"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).

Paul gave a summary of the whole message of the gospel in this one verse. "Justified" means "declared righteous," or "declared holy," in God's sight.

So many of the people of Jewish descent thought their rigid adherence to that Ceremonial Law we spoke of earlier was what would make them righteous or holy in God's sight.

They were looking at things all wrong. What God wanted his Old Testament believers to realize through the Ceremonial Law was that they were sinners, incapable of living up to the righteous demands of a holy God. All those rules and restrictions—as well as all the sacrifices that were part of Old Testament worship—were to point them to the real Savior—to Jesus.

All the accounts of the gospels show us how Jesus kept *all* of God's laws perfectly. He kept all the Ceremonial requirements, but also every single moral law God established for all people of all time. That was something no one else has ever been able to do. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, he paid for every single one of our failures as the sacrifice God demands for sin.

Paul pointed to Jesus. "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." Faith in Jesus is what saves, not following the Ceremonial Law. Faith in Jesus is what saves, not following even the moral law of God—all the "you shall not"s. In fact, you and I *cannot* perfectly follow those rules, so we would be doomed to failure. Faith in Jesus is the only way.

That's the conversation that needed to be had. That's what the believers in Antioch, both Jewish and Gentile believers, needed to know. Paul's confrontational conversation with Peter was necessary so they would learn and know the truth.

#### IV.

I wonder if Paul was thinking about his conversation with Jesus along the road to Damascus. As a Pharisee, Paul had been pretty proud of and certain of his status with God. He had also been dead wrong. The hard conversation was absolutely necessary so that Paul could have his life turned around.

Paul's conversation with Peter—difficult though it must have been—had a higher purpose. He wanted many believers to stay firm in their faith. He wanted Peter to repent of his sin and turn again to the solid faith he had displayed on the Day of Pentecost. While Paul doesn't specifically mention the results, his conversation must have had the desired effect, since Peter wrote his letters to other Christians after this time and died as a believer in his Lord Jesus.

There might be some difficult conversations in your future, too. Your goal in those conversations is not to point out sin just for the sake of pointing out a sin. You want your loved ones and friends to be in heaven with you forever. You want them to know the same truth Paul wanted Peter and the other believers to recognize: it is faith alone in Christ Jesus that saves a person from sin and brings them to heaven. Think again of the Theme of the Day. In part it said: "God wants the people of his church to be willing to say hard things to people when that is what is necessary to save them." That's what you want, too. God bless your conversations about the hard things. Amen.