

“A Teachable Moment”
Galatians 2:11-16

¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” ¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (ESV)

The Book of Galatians is a response from the Apostle Paul. Paul had gone into the area of Galatia, which would be what we know as modern day Turkey. He had planted a church and preached this thing we call the gospel: what it takes to be saved from your sins is faith alone in Jesus and nothing else. Some people came behind him and said, “Paul doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Paul’s not a real apostle, or he’s not as important as the apostles in Jerusalem,” on one hand. On the other hand, they said, “Also, his message isn’t right. He’s preaching Jesus plus nothing. We come from Jerusalem saying it’s Jesus plus circumcision. Unless you’re circumcised, as well as trusting Jesus, you can’t be saved—and obeying the rest of the law, too.” So Paul writes this letter to address them. Paul doesn’t do something in this letter that he does in all the rest of his letters, making it all the more stark. In all the rest of Paul’s letters, when he’s dealing with grievous sins (Corinth had everything: sexual sin, financial sin, worship issues). Paul opens up by saying, “I thank God for you.” The Galatians were sharp and tidy, and they all looked good, but Paul did not say, “I thank God for you.” Instead he launched right into his arguments. Remember, up to this point he’s been basically making two arguments, one being the argument that they said that he wasn’t as good as the other apostles. Paul makes the case in the first chapter that, “Not only am I as good as the other apostles, but I got my gospel directly from God. And, if anyone, including an apostle or an angel from heaven preaches anything else than what I’ve preached to you, may he be accursed.” At the beginning of chapter two Paul basically says, “Not only did I get my gospel from God but I laid it before the other apostles in Jerusalem and they said, ‘Thumbs up. You’re good to go.’ They added nothing to me,” he said.

What was important about verses 1 through 10 is that Paul basically conducts an experiment. He’s going to go to Jerusalem and he’s going out by revelation, and brings Titus with him, who is an uncircumcised Gentile. So, what are the Jerusalem apostles going to make Titus do? Are they going to demand that he be circumcised in order to be saved or are they not? The apostles in Jerusalem did not. They added nothing. They said, “Titus, you don’t have to be circumcised,” to his great relief, I imagine. On the other hand, others came in; remember it said, “They came in to spy out our freedom in order that they might bring us into slavery.” Paul says to that group of people, “We didn’t relent for even a moment. We didn’t submit to them, not even for a moment.” Paul wouldn’t budge. Circumcision is neither here nor there. If you think you ought to be circumcised, great. If you don’t, great. But as soon as you make it a necessity for salvation, that’s when the apostle Paul puts his foot down. That’s when we should put our foot down. There’s every chance that he could have taken Titus into Jerusalem, and if no one mentioned anything, Paul might have said to him, “Titus, it’s probably a good idea that you’re circumcised. It will help you fit in.” I don’t know how they knew or didn’t know, but that happened, apparently. But as soon as people said he has to be circumcised, that’s when Paul said no. This scene of events was in Jerusalem which is the center of the Jewish-Christianity. Immediately, it shifts to Antioch which was the center of Gentile-Christianity. What’s interesting is that in Jerusalem, they solved the problem. In other words, “Does someone need to be circumcised in order to be saved, or can they just trust Jesus?” Orthodoxy says, “Just trust Jesus.” Orthodoxy means “straight or right teaching.” So right teaching says that a Gentile doesn’t need to be circumcised in order to be saved. What they didn’t solve was the issue of orthopraxy, which is right or straight practice. What is the outworking of this thing called the Gospel? Sure, we all believe that you don’t need to be circumcised to be saved, but what does that look like in a place like Antioch?

Today we’re going to look at three things: a practical question, Peter’s pretense, and Paul’s offense.

Antioch was the center of Gentile Christianity. About 10% of the church was Jewish. For Jewish people who had become Christians or Jewish people who weren’t Christians for that matter, eating was everything. It was a cultural event. Among other things, it was the way you showed how obedient you were, by avoiding certain things or eating certain things and obeying certain laws. So the big question that they solved in verses 1-10 is that it’s okay for a Jew to be a Jew and it’s OK for a Gentile to be a Gentile, but what happens when they try to go to the same church? What do you prepare for a church supper? They can believe the gospel and you can say that circumcision is an issue of conscience, but at some level it’s going to come to loggerheads because at some point in Antioch they’re now at the same church. If you think that that question is not relevant for modern day, that question is one, I think, as a pastor I deal with all the time. Because different people have different things that are issues of conscience. For example, worship. Some people think it’s a sin if you don’t use organ 100% of the time. Some people think it’s a sin if you do. Both of them are wrong for thinking it’s a sin to begin with. They’ve moralized differences. How do you deal with differences? What does the gospel say about it?

I was a church planter and I used to train church planters. One of the things I used to teach was worship – how to develop a worship team, how to come up with a worship style. I would always ask church planters to break down into groups and answer a couple of questions. First question: “What kind of worship style do you prefer?” What do you like? Do you like organ music, or do you like traditional (whatever that means) or do you like contemporary (whatever that means)? What do you like in worship? Question

number two: "Assuming that all worship is done to God's glory and is intended to glorify God, what kind of worship do you think will best communicate the gospel in the area in which you are going to plant the church?" In other words, "If you're going to plant a church in the Deep South should you be using high church liturgy? Is it different than what you like?" Almost 100% of the time it was different. So question number three is: "What are you going to do about it? Is there anything you're willing to give up?" It's the same question for our church. The vision of our church is gathering, growing, serving, and going. So the church has to ask the question, "What kind of worship do you like?" This is a great question for sermon-based small groups to discuss. What kind of worship do you prefer? It's not a loaded question. Now, given the fact that in the past 30 years the neighborhood has gone from almost completely white to now 50% people of color, what kind of worship do you think would best communicate to those we are supposed to be gathering in? Then ask yourself the question, "Is that worship style the same as what I prefer?" And, "How does the gospel answer the division between that question? Am I willing to give up anything, or do I need to stand firm on something?" You could come to my office for one day and you could hear these questions all day long. So, it's a very relevant question: "What are you going to do? They have to go to church together now. The Jews think they should be eating this way. The Gentiles say they shouldn't be eating this way." It's interesting that you see two answers to the question, one good, one bad; one bogus, and one gospel driven. The bad one, of course, is Peter's pretense.

This is one of the most interesting passages to study, if you're a pastor at least, in the New Testament, to read how many of the ancient fathers struggled with this passage. Here you have the two of maybe the most famous people in all of Christianity who are having a cat fight right in front of everybody at a church supper. I don't know what it looked like, but people said, "It couldn't have been Peter who did that. It must have been someone else named Peter." Martin Luther says, "Not only is it Peter, but you should thank God it was Peter. Here's Peter who's the king of the world (if you will), the apostle whom everyone looks to, the go-to guy." Luther said, "No one's footing is so firm that he cannot fall. If Peter fell, then I too may fall." Here's the kicker. If Peter stood again, then I too may stand again." Luther says, "The fact that someone big and important could fall should give you hope because even that person is able to be redeemed and rise up again." This isn't the first time for Peter, by the way. Let's look at his pretense. In verse 11 it says,

¹¹ *But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.* ¹² *For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.* ¹³ *And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. (ESV)*

"The Cotton Patch Bible" was written in the '60s by a man named Clarence Jordan. He lived in the South and was deeply embroiled in the civil rights movement, and he re-translated the gospel. It's sort of like "The Message" for Southerners. It was all couched in terms of the civil rights movement, and his translation of this passage was interesting. He says, "When the Rock (Peter) came to Atlanta (to Antioch) I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned. Before certain men from Jim arrived, he was eating with black folks. But when they came, he drew back and separated himself from them fearing the segregationists. And the rest of the liberal white folks acted hypocritically along with him so that even Barney was led astray by their hypocrisy. There's an element also of race in here. Remember in Acts chapter 10, Peter has this great vision from God: this curtain comes down with unclean animals and God says, "Take and eat." Peter says, "I'll never eat anything unclean." There's a Peter Principal in business and there's a Peter Principal in the Bible. The Peter Principal in the Bible said, "Whatever he says he's not going to do he's eventually going to do." "I'll never submit. I'll never suffer. I'll never eat something unclean." And God says, "Take and eat." Peter takes and eats, then he goes and preaches the gospel to Cornelius. He learns through all that that the Gentiles are acceptable, not just acceptable in the sense that they can be saved, but they're acceptable in the sense that you can fellowship with them. In Acts chapter 10 some of the Judaizers said, "Peter, what are you doing eating with the Gentiles?" He tells them the whole story, about the unclean and the clean, and that Gentiles are acceptable. Who am he to argue with God?" So Peter knows that the Gentiles are okay. There's nothing wrong with eating with the Gentiles. In fact, he does so. Paul tells us. He says, "When you got here you ate with the Gentiles and as soon as these guys got here you stopped eating with the Gentiles. What's the deal?" Let me read to you again verse 12.

¹² *For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. (ESV)*

It would have been interesting to ask Peter, "Why are you withdrawing?" These men from James came. We don't know if they were sent from James or if they just said they were from James because at some point James disowns people who are going around in his name preaching circumcision. We don't even know if they wanted anything. We just know they showed up. Imagine Peter is at a singles barbeque with a pork sandwich in his hand and he's getting ready to take a bite and he sees some men from James coming in so he slinks out. Why did he do it? Usually the reason that is given for not doing things is, "I don't want to offend the weaker brother." So you put the pork down. If that's your understanding of what it means to offend or not offend the weaker brother you're completely off base. I learned this about fifteen years ago at my first General Assembly. General Assembly, if you're not Presbyterian, is a once-a-year meeting where the churches come together to do business. It was my first meeting, and I was at dinner with my best friend, Paul Warren, and his father and mother. His father is also a pastor. I was sitting in this restaurant where everyone had the khaki pants and the blue shirt and the blue blazer, except me, of course. At some point Paul, my friend, ordered an adult beverage. I said, "Is that okay? You can drink beer here?" His father rebuked me. He said, "Tommy, the Bible says you should accommodate the weaker brother. Don't worry about them Pharisees." I said, "What?" He said, "Anyone who's here who would have trouble with you having a beer is just a Pharisee." The point is that that principle is given not so you don't offend Pharisees. The "weaker brother" is given so that you don't lead astray people who are genuinely weak. For example, if you have a friend who is an alcoholic, when he comes over for dinner you probably shouldn't serve beer. It's as simple as that. That's the

weaker brother principle. But if there's someone in church that you're constantly avoiding because you're doing something which, according to your conscience is okay, in order to not have to deal with them you're constantly saying, "Oh, I don't want to offend the weaker brother. I'll spit my gum out." Peter might have called them weaker brothers. Lots of people in the church might call people like that weaker brothers. Do you remember what Paul called them last week? Paul called them false brothers. Anyone who would come in and demand that you obey their rules in order to be acceptable is a false brother. But that's not why Peter did it. Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles because he feared the circumcision party. The language is interesting. It says, "When they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party." The words "he drew back" are sort of like military words, meaning he retreated. It's sort of like a girl who doesn't want to go on a date with a guy so she just doesn't answer his phone calls. In other words, Peter didn't just see the guys in the back and ran out the back of the room. He began to slowly separate himself from Gentiles until at some point he was not eating with them at all. So they said, "Peter, do you want to come over for dinner at our house tonight? We're having hog roast." "Can't do it. Sorry, I have other plans. I'm going to eat matzo with the Judaizers." He feared the circumcision party. Now, did he fear harm from them? I don't think so. I think Peter feared the hassle. I can tell you from being a pastor, from being who I am. I think he just feared the hassle. He didn't want another argument. He didn't want to have to deal with them. He didn't want to have to go to Jerusalem and defend himself. He just thought, "You know, the pragmatic thing to do is just quit eating with the Gentiles and I won't have to deal with them. We learned that Peter is weak here. In other words, his sin isn't malicious, his sin isn't that he was doing something wrong, his sin is that he refused to do something right. In fact, Peter does the exact opposite thing here that Paul does in the previous ten verses. In the previous ten verses, the Judaizers came in and apparently demanded that Titus be circumcised. Paul puts his foot down and says, "We did not yield to them even for a moment. Not one second." Peter, on the other hand, sees the guys coming and just leaves the table and won't eat with Gentiles anymore. But there's something else. Peter is a leader. Everyone knows that. So what happens when people who are in leadership start to do that? Everyone else follows. Notice what it says.

¹³ *And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. (ESV)*

The word "hypocrisy" is almost the same root, from Greek, as "theater." Really what it gets to is, "someone who wears a mask", "someone who play acts." He says the rest of the Jews were play acting. They were led away by Peter's hypocrisy. In other words, Peter was play acting. He was giving a face to one thing but he was actually doing another thing. Have you seen "Ice Age," the first movie? Diego, the saber tooth tiger, goes along with the Mammoth and Sid, acting like he's their friend but really intending to kill them. That's hypocrisy. He's playing the part. Paul says the hypocrisy was so bad that even Barnabas was sucked into it. That language is so important because if the gospel is true you don't need to be a hypocrite. If the gospel is true you don't need to wear the mask anymore. I got a new album by Pierce Pettis, who is one of my favorite singers. He has this great line in one of his songs. He said, "God always sees you naked." No matter what you put on the outside, God sees you exactly as you are. If God sees you naked and loves you and accepts you and is willing to give the life of his son for you, who cares what other people see? You see, if the gospel is true you can take off the mask. If the gospel is true you're acceptable to Jesus. And, I mean that not just for you as individuals but as a whole church. I'm rarely mistaken for being a pastor. If I'm out in the community and say, "Guess what I do?" not one time has anyone ever said, "You look like a pastor. You could be a very holy person." No one has ever said that, which I use to my great advantage. I always ask people, "Have you ever heard of First EPC?" "Oh yeah, I've heard of that place." "Have you been there?" "I've been there once or twice." "Why didn't you come back?" "It's too clean." I guess that's kudos to the janitors. "What do you mean by that?" "Everyone there looks like they have their act together and everyone is happy. That's just not me. My life is screwed up. I don't have anything together." Of course you know what I want to say at that moment? "If you only knew what I knew." But why is it that people can walk in and they think everyone has everything together when I know you don't? It's because we're so busy keeping that mask on. The gospel of Jesus says, "Take it off." You can take it off because you have something else. You have the righteousness of Jesus. That's the remedy to this problem, by the way. That's the remedy to the Judaizers, that's the remedy to the problem in Galatia, that's the remedy to everything – it's this gospel of Jesus and what the gospel of Jesus does. It justifies us before God. That's Paul's offense. Paul's offense is simply the gospel of Jesus. Let's read it.

¹⁴ *But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (ESV)*

He says that their conduct was not in step with the gospel. There's a difference here between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. You can be orthodox in your thinking but not necessarily orthodox in your walking. Paul said here that they were walking out of step, or they were walking crookedly, not in line with the truth. So they believed the right thing but they weren't living the right thing. Do you believe the right thing? In believing the right thing do you therefore live the right thing? In other words, if the gospel calls us to reach out to our friends and neighbors, do you do that? If the gospel calls us to show hospitality, do you do that? We tend to think of the gospel only in terms of sin. Have I avoided doing bad things? And you should do that. But have you done all these good things? If you're not reaching out to people, if you're not gathering as well as perfecting, you're walking out of line with the gospel. Are you contributing to the mission of the church, this church or any church for that matter? Are you walking in line with the gospel? If you think, "Man, I'm not walking in line with the gospel. That actually makes me feel guilty, Tommy," the next two lines from Paul are great news because what Paul tells you is that your righteousness before God is not based on what you do. It's not based on bad things that you avoid or good things that you do. It's based on what Jesus has done. The law asks this question, "What have I done?" The gospel asks a completely different question, "What has Jesus done?" The law asks, "What does God demand of me?" The gospel says, "What has God done for me?" Paul tells us next. In verse 15 Paul appeals to their common heritage. I think he's still talking to Peter.

¹⁵ *We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; (ESV)*

So he's telling Peter, "Peter, you and I are in the same boat here. We're both Jews. We're both born in the covenant, we're born under the law, and we're both circumcised at eight days. All of these things we have in common. Then Paul brings in this thing called the gospel.

¹⁶ *yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (ESV)*

An alternate translation for this word, "justified" is "counted righteous." So when you read through that, it would say, "We know that a person is not counted righteous by works of the law." Over and over, three times in one verse Paul says you're not counted righteous by works of the law. Do you think that's an important concept to Paul? How then are we counted righteous? It can't be by works of the law. People say, "What are works of the law? Is it the Ten Commandments? Is it the civil law?" Martin Luther said, "Anything that is not grace is law." You're not justified by it.

But what does it mean to be justified? Most of us think in terms only of forgiveness, and here's what forgiveness is. Let's say you owe a \$50,000 debt and someone comes along and says, "Tommy, I'm going to write a check for \$50,000 and fill that hole." After that fact, although that's a good thing, you would agree, am I at that point rich? Once someone has paid off my \$50,000, am I wealthy at that point? Absolutely not. I'm neutral. I just try to keep my nose clean. What the gospel says is that we are not only forgiven of our sins, our debt is not only paid, but we are made righteous. In other words, instead of someone saying, "I'm just going to pay the \$50,000," what if someone says, "Tommy, you have a \$50,000 debt and I'm going to put a trillion dollars in your account." At what point would I be rich? What the gospel says is not only are our sins forgiven because of the cross of Jesus, but also all of our sin becomes His and all of His righteousness or positive credit toward God becomes ours. The way we gain positive credit toward God is not through works of the law, but through the righteousness of Christ received by faith alone. Do you believe it? Paul gives three different ways here. He gives a general way, a personal way, and a universal way. First, a person is not justified or made righteous by the works of the law, but through faith. A general principle: you can't be made righteous through works of the law. Martin Luther said, "If you're not going to believe that God will forgive you and count you righteous for the sake of Jesus' works, what in the world makes you think he could count you righteous for the sake of your works?" Then Paul personalizes it. He says, "Peter, you know that we have not been counted righteous by works of the law. You and me, Peter." Then finally he universalizes it, "No one is made righteous by works of the law." You can't do it. How then are we made righteous? By faith alone in the work of Jesus Christ. To do anything else is silly. To do anything else is futile.

I'll close with this. When I was in Ethiopia, I had to do home visits. A translator, myself, and a doctor, would visit a woman who was sick. Three or four times I'd look at the schedule and it would say, "Spiritual counseling." What does that mean? And they never really told me, but that meant I had to go and meet with about ten or fifteen people who are Muslim or orthodox, basically almost anything except Christians. It was sort of dancing around time because it's like, "So, what do you guys want to talk about? Don't speak English, that's the problem, right?" The translator would say that and we'd chit chat and I'd say, "How about I sing a song?" I remember I sang, "Jesus Loves Me" to them. I said, "I'll sing a song if you sing a song." I was buying time here until it was over. The first time I said, "Well okay, I guess it's time to go," the translator put her hand up and she "Dog Whispered" me, frankly. She said, "Pssst. Don't you think you should tell them about eternal life?" I said, "I guess I should." So thinking fast, realizing I was in Ethiopia and not in Puyallup or somewhere, so I didn't say, "Did you cry when Old Yeller died?" That's what I often will say to people. I used the old standard, "If you died tonight, how do you know God would let you into heaven?" To a person, fifteen people, "Good works, good works, good works, good works, good works, good works, good works, good works, good works." Okay, now I have to think fast. "I said tonight." "What do you mean?" I said, "If you died tonight, why would God let you into heaven? Here's what I heard [playing cricket sounds]. Crickets. Nothing. In other words, I went around and asked, "Are you good enough right now?" Crickets, crickets, crickets, crickets, crickets, crickets. "Because if you're not good enough right now to satisfy God and get into heaven, what makes you think you were ever going to be good enough to satisfy God and get into heaven?" Most of those people had never thought about that.

How about you? Have you thought about it? Maybe you've never thought about it. Maybe you thought, "Well, it's all about being a good person. I grew up as a Presbyterian and I'm here now." Do you realize that your goodness counts for nothing, and that the only thing that matters is the person and work of Jesus? Think about that.