

Protecting the Gospel's Purity

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. – Galatians 2:1-10 ESV

As Paul continued his defense of his apostolic ministry and message, he related how he had been actively ministering the gospel among the Gentiles for another 15 years before he would return to Jerusalem. Paul records that he and Barnabas made the trip together. According to Luke's account in the book of Acts, Paul had been helping Barnabas minister to the Gentiles in Antioch. Luke gives us some important insight into what had been happening. It seems that after the stoning of Stephen in Jerusalem, many of the followers of Christ, fearing for their own lives, fled for their safety. Luke tells us, "And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles" (Luke 8:1 ESV). Paul, up until his conversion, had played a major role in that persecution, and Luke goes on to say that it resulted in believers moving even further away from Judea.

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. – Acts 11:19-24 ESV

That is when Barnabas, knowing of Paul's ministry to Gentiles, decided to pick him up and enlist him in the ministry going on in Antioch. Not long after that, Paul would return with Barnabas to

Jerusalem in order to report all that he had seen. More than likely, Barnabas wanted Paul there as an expert witness.

But Paul makes it clear that he returned to Jerusalem because of a vision he had received from God, not because of the invitation of Barnabas. It would seem that God wanted this matter of the conversion of the Gentiles made a top priority in the growing church. It was essential that all of the apostles be on the same page regarding how these newly converted Gentiles were to be handled. There were still some who were expecting them to be circumcised and even keep many of the Jewish rules and rituals. Paul's ministry to the Gentiles had been hounded by a group of individuals who were demanding that all Gentile converts be circumcised to validate their salvation. Paul had vigorously opposed this teaching as a distortion of the gospel message, exposing it for what it was: a blatant contradiction to the message of faith in Christ alone.

These opening verses in chapter two are Paul's attempt to let his readers know that he had been willing to stand up to even the apostles, Peter, James, and John. He had not been starry eyed or awestruck by his meeting with these men. If anything, Paul saw them himself as their equals. They had each received their commission from Jesus Himself. He clearly stated his purpose for going to Jerusalem: "to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain" (Galatians 2:2 ESV). Paul had no doubts about the accuracy of his message, but he was very concerned that if those who were demanding circumcision of the Gentiles were not stopped, the purity of the gospel would be damaged. He was preaching salvation as made possible by the grace of God alone through faith in Christ alone. No kinds of works were necessary. Adding a requirement of circumcision would undermine that message and add an unnecessary barrier or roadblock to the path of salvation. So, his trip to Jerusalem was intended to defend his God-given message and convince his peers that his ministry to the Gentiles was valid and his message was complete, needing nothing more added to it.

As Paul would tell the believers in Rome, circumcision was a matter of the heart, not the flesh. "For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God" (Romans 2:28-29 ESV). While circumcision had been a God-given sign or seal of the unique relationship the people of Israel had with Him, Paul argued that the indwelling Holy Spirit was God's new seal of approval. Paul told the Gentile believers in Ephesus, "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 1:13 ESV).

Man has always been obsessed with the idea that there is something he must do to earn a right standing before God. We are wired to believe that we must work our way into God's good graces, but the beauty of the gospel is that everything has been done for us. There is nothing for us to add to the equation. It is Jesus plus *nothing*. So that no one can boast or brag. Salvation is the work of God, from beginning to end. As the great old hymn, *Rock of Ages*, says...

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
simply to the cross I cling.*

Just Faith = Justification

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 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. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 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?"

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 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. – Galatians 2:11-16 ESV

During the early days of the church's growth after Pentecost, there was a natural or better yet, a supernatural division of effort. Peter, along with James and John, "had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised" (Galatians 2:7b ESV). Yet Paul wrote, "I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised" (Galatians 2:7a ESV). Paul had been given his commission directly from Jesus. He had declared Paul "a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15 ESV). God had divided up the responsibilities when it came to disseminating the gospel, but He would not tolerate a dividing of the gospel message. It would be by grace alone through Christ alone in faith alone.

That is why Paul claimed, "when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned" (Galatians 2:11 ESV). Those are bold words and can come across as a bit arrogant, but they simply reflect Paul's determination to proclaim the gospel message he had received from Jesus Himself. As a former Pharisee, he knew all too well the pantheon of rules and regulations associated with Judaism. Paul still considered himself a Jew. But he also knew that, when it came to salvation and man's justification with God, the works of the law were worthless, "because by works of the law no one will be justified" (Galatians 2:16 ESV).

His primary problem with Peter seemed to be his hypocrisy. When Peter came to Antioch to witness the ministry there firsthand, he gladly associated with the Gentile believers, even eating with them. But when a group of men showed up who represented "the circumcision party," Peter disassociated himself from the Gentiles. Who these men were, we are not told. Paul indicates that they came from James. They could have been members of his church in Jerusalem. But it does not seem that they were sent by James, because he had endorsed Paul's ministry (verse 9). But these men were strong proponents of requiring the Gentile believers to be circumcised, and when they showed up in Antioch, Peter was intimidated by their presence and disassociated himself from the Gentile believers. And his actions influenced Barnabas and the other Jewish believers in the church there to follow his example. In essence, he divided the body of Christ and Paul would not stand for it – regardless of whether Peter was an apostle of

Jesus Christ or not. As far as Paul was concerned, Peter stood condemned. He was guilty as charged. Paul boldly claimed, “their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2:14 ESV). They were guilty of adding unnecessary requirements to the gospel, and were, in essence, preaching a different gospel.

Paul had opened his letter with words of warning, “there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:7-8 ESV). Peter’s actions were hypocritical, but also divisive. They were causing the Gentile believers to doubt the veracity of their salvation. Because they had not been circumcised, they were tempted to see themselves as somehow lesser Christians or perhaps, not Christians at all. They would have also wondered why Paul had not told them about circumcision if it was a non-negotiable requirement for salvation. So, Paul’s ministry and message was at risk of being undermined.

But for Paul, there was no question as to the truth of his message. He was confident that salvation was through faith in Christ alone. Circumcision was not necessary. He even reminded Peter and the other Jews, “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” (Galatians 2:16 ESV). Paul made this same claim in his letter to the Romans:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. — Romans 3:21-25 ESV

Paul would stubbornly hold to his belief that salvation could only be received by faith, not by any human effort. Nothing was to be added to the offer of salvation. There were to be no addendums or alterations of any kind. Salvation was the work of God, not men. We bring nothing to the table. We are made right with God not by what we do, but by what Christ has done for us. All men stand before God as sinful and worthy of condemnation. His judgment against our sin is just and righteous. Our penalty of death is well-deserved and well-within in rights as the righteous judge of the universe to enforce. But He provided a means by which all men, Jews and Gentiles might be restored to a right relationship with Him, in spite of themselves. “God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 NLT). Faith alone in Christ alone. That is the only requirement.

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one—

who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. – Romans 3:28-30 ESV

We are made right with God by believing in what Christ has accomplished for us on the cross. He died so that we might live. He rose again so that we might have eternal life. He has done it all.

Motivated by Love

But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And 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. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. – Galatians 2:17-21 ESV

Paul's take on the universal problem of sin is best summed up in his oft-quoted statement: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23 ESV). He went on to say, "and [all] are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (Romans 3:24-26 ESV). When Paul used the word "all", he was including the Jews. Even the chosen people of God, the descendants of Abraham, found themselves in the same condition as the unrighteous Gentiles. They were all guilty and stood condemned before God because of their sins. Because while the Jews had received the law of God through Moses, they had been unable to keep God's righteous decrees perfectly and completely. In their attempt to be justified or made right with God by keeping the law, they only found themselves condemned by the law.

And Paul is claiming the same thing to be true regarding the proponents of circumcision. They were attempting to add circumcision as a necessary requirement for all Gentiles to "complete" their salvation experience. They were teaching that it was disobedience, and therefore sin, for the Gentiles to refuse circumcision. But Paul argued that justification through Christ reveals that all are sinners, regardless of whether they have been circumcised or not. Jews and Gentiles all stand before God as guilty of sin and worthy of death, because the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). When men finally come to the realization that they are completely incapable of justifying themselves before God through human effort, they are forced to recognize their own sinfulness and guilt. That is what Paul means when he says they are "found to be sinners." The process of being made right with God through faith in Christ necessarily reveals our sinfulness and need for a Savior. But that does not make Christ a servant of sin. In other words, it is not that Christ is leading us into or encouraging us to sin, but He is simply exposing our sin to us. We discover that, as Isaiah says, even our most righteous acts are like filthy rags before God – stained, contaminated and unacceptable (Isaiah 64:6).

So, Paul contends, why would anyone want to rebuild what has been torn down? Why would we want to go back to trying to earn favor with God through rule-keeping? The law could never save anyone. All it could do was condemn and accuse. This did not make the law an accomplice in man's sin, but the law was God's holy and righteous means of revealing the full extent of man's sinfulness. Paul put it this way:

Well then, am I suggesting that the law of God is sinful? Of course not! In fact, it was the law that showed me my sin. I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, "You must not covet." But sin used this command to arouse all kinds of covetous desires within me! If there were no law, sin would not have that power. – Romans 7:7-8 NLT

As a result, Paul says, "I died to the law — I stopped trying to meet all its requirements — so that I might live for God" (Galatians 2:19 NLT). He learned to stop trying to earn favor with God through religious rule-keeping. His life was no longer based upon human effort. He had died alongside Christ and had been given a new life with a new nature. "My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20 NLT). Paul wanted his readers to know that they had a new power within them, provided by God and made possible by Jesus' death on the cross. No longer did they have to trust in themselves and their own self-effort. They were to trust in the Son of God and to rely on the Spirit of God who dwelt within them.

Paul had no desire to rebuild what had been torn down. He didn't want to go back to his old way of life, attempting to please God through trying to keep the law. He remembered all too well what that life had been like. The more he had tried to keep the law, the more his sinful nature seemed to resist and rebel against the law. If it said, "Don't covet", he wanted to covet all the more. Like a child who is told not to do something, he felt compelled to do it even more than ever. Now that he was free in Christ, he had no desire to go back to slavery he had felt under the law. And he did not want his readers to fall back under the law either. The bottom line for Paul was, that if righteousness could have ever been achieved through the law, then Jesus' death would have been meaningless and unnecessary. But as Peter wrote, "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" (1 Peter 3:18 ESV). Jesus died so that we might live. He fulfilled the law we were incapable of keeping. He did what we could not do and did for us what we could never have done for ourselves, made us right with God. So now our obedience to God's righteous standards is motivated by a sense of love and gratitude, not duty. We are no longer trying to earn God's love, but simply return it. We are not trying to make Him accept us but are only trying to express our appreciation for having already done so. We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).