

LESSON FOUR

(2:11-21)

Paul Opposes Cephas (2:11-14)

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 ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. 13 And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity. 14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about 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 compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Another showdown! Paul had successfully defended the gospel against false brethren in Jerusalem, but now he faced a fellow-apostle in Antioch. The opponent this time was perhaps more sincere, but he was still wrong. So, Paul met the problem head-on. God's gospel is true, though every man a liar - even if that man is the apostle Peter!

V. 11 When Cephas Came To Antioch - Some time after the Jerusalem Council, Cephas (Peter - see notes on 1:18) went to Antioch to visit Paul and the Gentile Christians. The visit is not recorded in Acts, so all we know about it are the few details given in this text.

I Opposed Him To His Face - Peter made a glaring error, as is explained in the next verse. Paul could have attacked Peter behind his back, but he chose to confront him face to face. This is the only right way to oppose a brother.

Because He Stood Condemned - In refusing to be seen eating with Gentiles, Peter violated what he surely knew was right. Both the decree of God in Acts 10:15 and the decision of the Council in Acts 15:28-29 clearly condone the diet of the Gentiles. When Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles, he was wrong and he knew it.

V. 12 Before Certain Men Came From James - The text does not state that these men had been sent from James with any sinister motives. For whatever reason they had been sent, their arrival surprised Peter in the act of eating with the Gentiles. Caught off guard and embarrassed, Peter quickly abandoned his non-Jewish friends.

He Ate With The Gentiles - While the Gentile Christians had been pronounced free from the law, the Jewish Christians were unsure about their own state. Peter should be commended for going beyond the letter of the law and following the spirit of the Jerusalem decree. He rightly surmised that God was also freeing the Jews from the legalistic burden. In the spirit of Christian liberty, Peter sat, for the first time in his life, at a Gentile table.

But When They Came - With the sudden arrival of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, Peter was no longer certain about his right to eat Gentile food. Like a criminal caught in the act of committing a crime, Peter hastily withdrew.

He Drew Back And Separated Himself - Peter strained at the gnat and swallowed the camel (Matt. 23:24). To avoid a possible ceremonial contamination with what was "unclean," he committed a very grievous sin before God. He set aside brothers for whom Christ died.

When the text says Peter "drew back," it uses the word which means to "shrink back from something repulsive, as in fear or disgust." Suddenly the Gentile Christians were as unwelcome as lepers! When Peter "separated" himself, he was completely cutting himself off from these brothers. In effect, he was excommunicating them. Perhaps the Gentile Christians could take comfort in the words of Jesus when He used the same term, "Happy are you when men shall hate you and *reject* you." It was a bitter pill to swallow, however, that this rejection came from a fellow Christian - even an apostle!

Fearing The Circumcision Party - The old Peter, who had denied his Lord before a little girl, was coming to the surface. Although he had already decided that eating with Gentiles

was right in the sight of God, he was worried how it might look in the sight of men. No doubt the Jerusalem Christians were a bit surprised to find Peter “defiling” himself, but their surprise should not have mattered. Peter simply lacked the courage of his convictions.

V. 13 The Rest Of The Jews Acted Insincerely - Peter had set the example for the other Jewish-Christians. Together they acted insincerely (literally, “played the hypocrite together”). The word “hypocrite” came from the Greek theater, where actors wore the masks of comedy or tragedy, and were called “play-actors.” The outward appearance and actions of an actor are not the same as his inner nature. In Peter’s situation his inner Christ-likeness was not being matched by his actions.

Even Barnabas Was Carried Away - It is ironic that brave Barnabas, who had championed the underdog in Acts 9:27, should now desert the Gentile Christians. It is ironic, even shocking, to find the co-leader of the first great missionary journey to the Gentiles (Acts 13.2ff.) now joining the action against them. (It makes one wonder if this could have contributed to the parting of ways between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36-39.)

V. 14 When I Saw That They Were Not Straightforward - To be straightforward means “to walk in a straight line.” Peter and the brethren were out of line with the decision of the Jerusalem Council, and more than that, out of line with the decree of God. The gospel allows no such discrimination.

The Truth Of The Gospel - Paul had much more in mind than church socials when he included this incident in our epistle. The whole point of this section is this: Can one man and the true gospel stand against Peter, Barnabas, and the whole group of important visitors from Jerusalem? This passage draws a clear conclusion: one man, standing squarely on the truth of the gospel, constitutes a majority.

I Said To Cephas Before Them All - Why did Paul rebuke Peter so publicly? Why not rebuke him in private? Peter’s sin was a public sin, with consequences involving many people. Such a public sin required a public correction. The whole question of Jew and Gentile fellowship was at stake.

“If You, Though A Jew, Live Like A Gentile - Peter had begun to realize that Christ had set him free from certain Jewish rituals and ceremonies. He was cautiously leaving them behind. Now, in a sudden turnabout, he has insisted that the Gentiles be more Jewish than he himself. Peter surely realized his glaring inconsistency.

Just how much of the Mosaic law and customs the Jewish Christians were keeping is hard to determine. As late as Acts 21:20-26, they were still making vows in the temple. With the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., God’s final verdict on Jewish practices was made clear.

Justified by Faith in Christ (2:15-21)

15 “We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, 16 yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we 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 shall no one be justified. 17 But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we ourselves were found to be sinners, is Christ then an agent of sin? Certainly not! 18 But if I build up again those things which I tore down, then I prove myself a transgressor. 19 For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God. 20 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. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose.”

V. 15 Jews By Birth And Not Gentile Sinners - “Gentile sinners,” as they were typically called by the Jews, might have objected to keeping dietary laws for purely selfish reasons. “Jews by birth,” such as Paul and Peter, now must also see that such regulations have been abolished.

V. 16 Yet Who Know - Both Peter and Paul knew this truth of the gospel. Paul was not forcing a strange new doctrine on Peter; he was urging him to face up to what he already knew.

A Man Is Not Justified By Works Of The Law - This is the grand gospel truth. Man is not justified by keeping the law. In fact, man is free not only from the Old Testament law, but from any law. The Greek text, as Paul wrote it, does not have the word “the” before law. Therefore, man is free from law - not just from the law (of Moses). While it was the Mosaic law that the people knew best, it was not just that law that was canceled. All legalism is dead!

Paul spoke similarly of “law” and not just “the law” in Gal. 2:19; 3:2, 5, and 10. This is clearly stated in Romans 3:21 as well: “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it.”

But Through Faith In Jesus Christ - When Martin Luther rediscovered this glorious truth, the Protestant Reformation began; and the shackles of Roman Catholicism were broken. It is by faith, not by works of law, that a man is justified or pronounced innocent before God. Now the kind of faith that thus justifies is active (James 2:17) and energetic (Gal. 5:6). Let no man pretend to have this faith who merely believes a few facts about Jesus. Real faith is commitment and trust. He who truly commits himself to Jesus and trusts him as Lord is counted as righteous by God.

Even We Have Believed In Christ Jesus - “We,” Paul and Peter, have put our commitment and trust in Jesus.

In Order To Be Justified - To be justified is to be pronounced innocent and acquitted. It is not to escape punishment on a mere technicality and then walk through the rest of life branded as a criminal who slipped past justice. It is to be able to stand before God clean and pure, “just-as-if-I’d” never sinned.

Because By Works Of The Law Shall No One Be Justified - Again, what Paul actually said was “by works of law.” He did not say “the law.” Just as David wrote in Psalm 143:2, no man can earn his way into a state of righteousness before God.

V. 17 But If, In Our Endeavor - Paul now moves to meet two possible problems in the doctrine of salvation by faith in Christ. Verse seventeen presents the first possible hazard, and verse eighteen presents the second. Let me explain them in this way:

(vs. 17) What if I tear down all law, and then abuse my freedom and become very sinful?

(vs. 18) What if, on the other hand, I build the law back and then try to obey it?

As we analyze the first possible hazard, we must admit that it is certainly possible for a man to abuse his freedom. But if he does, it is not Christ’s fault. (Certainly not!, or God forbid! - KJV) Just as when any child grows up, God’s children are given freedom as mature sons in Christ. Whether the new freedom leads on to sin or to righteousness depends on the person’s heart. Yes! There is some danger involved in giving the new adult his freedom. But - the only alternative to liberty is law . . . and permanent guardianship.

As we analyze the second hazard, we must admit that it is possible for someone to try to go back and keep the law of Moses, or perhaps some other legal code. However, the very best that such a person could hope for is to prove all over again that he is a transgressor and cannot keep all the laws.

Between the extremes of lawless chaos and legal chains is the position of the Christian. His life is being molded by the will of his Lord and his actions are motivated by love. God’s precepts become the principles by which he lives, and he follows the high ethical standards because he wants to, not because he has to.

V. 19 For I Through The Law Died To The Law - Law was a very harsh taskmaster. It burdened and beat Paul (as well as all men) until they collapsed under the load. Law made demands, but gave no ability to meet those demands. All the law could do was demand, forbid, judge, condemn. Finally Paul, as the slave of the law, was beaten to death.

That I Might Live To God - Law can only kill; only God can make alive. Now that Paul has been brought back to life in Christ, he is free to live for Christ.

V. 20 I Have Been Crucified With Christ - Law demanded death as the penalty for sin (Ezekiel 18:10-13). When Christ went to the cross to pay that penalty, Paul went with him. In fact, every Christian was there, dying and paying the price for sin, in the person of Jesus Christ.

It Is No Longer I Who Live, But Christ Who Lives In Me - The old man of sin is dead. The new man has been made alive by the spirit of Christ. Freed from the shackles and chains of the former master, the Christian is open under new management. He has denied self (Matt. 16: 24-25) and has yielded to the entry of a new spirit (Rom. 8:9). He can say with Paul in Phil. 1:21 that “to live is Christ.”

The Life I Now Live In The Flesh - On the surface it might seem that men killed by the law and made alive by God just go on living the same as before. While they do remain on earth and in their bodies, however, they have a new spirit and their citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20).

I Live By Faith In The Son Of God - Faith in Christ becomes the motivating principle for all of life. If any man should abandon Christ as the reason and purpose for his living, he would, of course, revert to a standing before God based on law. (See Gal. 5:1-6).

Who Loved Me and Gave Himself For Me - The price paid at Calvary makes possible freedom from legalism. When Jesus has done so much for us, is it not reasonable that we should gladly live by our commitment of faith in Him?

V. 21 I Do Not Nullify The Grace Of God - The way Paul could have nullified God’s grace was by choosing legalism. When God tried to give salvation as a gift, Paul could have said, “No thanks! I don’t need your charity. I’m going to earn this all by myself.”

If Justification Were Through The Law, Then Christ Died To No Purpose - Christ did not die just to give us a better way or an easier way. He died on Calvary because that was the only way!

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. How did Paul correct Peter? (See vs. 11 and 14) Why was this the right way to do it?
2. Why did Peter stop eating with the Gentiles?
3. What was the reaction of Barnabas?
4. Did Jews who became Christians continue to keep such rules as the diet laws? (See vs. 14)
5. Why did Paul say “Gentile sinners” in verse 15?
6. What is the difference between “works of law” and “works of the law”?
7. What does it mean to be justified?

8. What are the dangers of discontinuing the law? (See vs. 17 and 18)
9. In what ways is the Christian “crucified with Christ”?
10. Now might a person nullify God’s grace?

ABA REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What did Cephas do that caused him to stand condemned?
2. Discuss the meaning of the term “drew back” in Gal. 2:12.
3. In what way did the actions of Cephas “excommunicate” the Gentile Christians?
4. What does this lesson teach about the word “hypocrite”?
5. How were Cephas and the Jewish-Christians “playing the hypocrite together”?
6. “One man, standing squarely on the truth of the _____, constitutes a _____.”
7. Why did Paul confront Cephas in public rather than in private?
8. “With the _____ of the _____ in _____ God’s final verdict on Jewish practices was made clear.”
9. In the Greek text, what is significant about Paul omitting the word “the” before “law” in Gal. 2:16?
10. What advice would you give a new Christian regarding the danger and temptation of abusing one’s freedom in Christ?
11. How would you try to restore a Christian who turned away from freedom in Christ and wanted to revert back to a system of legalism and lawkeeping?
12. Memorize Gal. 2:20-21 from your own Bible. What do the words “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who live in me” mean to you, and how can you apply this in everyday life?
13. Why is it so important for a Christian to “live by faith in the Son of God”? What results when a Christian fails to do this?
14. Reflect upon the words, “the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.” What does this indicate about your worth in the eyes of Jesus, and how will these words motivate you to live a life which brings glory and honor to Him?
15. Why would Christ’s death be “to no purpose” if justification came through the law?