

Galatians 2:11-21

My first experience with this passage was in my very first Bible class at the Christian college where I majored in biblical studies. The title of the course was biblical foundations.

The professor taught us that “ ***We had been crucified with Christ***” and that “***Christ lived within us.***” Knowing and believing this truth would enable me to live the way that God intended me to live. If I had faith in the truth of this promise I now had the ability to transcend sin in my life.

Although I was relatively new to the faith, the professor’s perspective didn’t make any sense to me in the context my own experience. I knew I sinned even when I didn’t want to and I didn’t know any other believers who didn’t sin.

My second experience with this passage was in an exegesis tutorial in a graduate school setting. We spent the entire school year studying Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

In that class I learned that the purpose of this letter was to confront a doctrinal debate between the works theology of the party of the circumcision on the one hand, and the gospel of faith asserted by the apostle Paul on the other.

My third experience with this passage began a couple years ago. I had never really understood this section and how it fit into the over-all argument of the letter. Being a student of the scriptures and human nature, I have always been intrigued with the bible’s account of interactions between people and how the authors of the bible understand those interactions and connect it to their argument.

My recent study has resulted in a paradigm shift of sorts. Understanding this section has transformed my understanding of the overall argument and Paul's purpose for writing this letter. It is not what I was taught in my first experience nor is it what I thought I understood in my second.

History of Book: The letter to the Galatians is one of the earliest letters written by Paul. It was written in response to a conflict that was taking place in a region where Paul had preached the gospel during his first missionary journey. Paul is very concerned that the believers who he had taught the gospel to will be persuaded by the "false gospel" of the party of the circumcision. He is writing this letter to warn his readers of his concerns.

The setting: In chapter 2:11-21 Paul is recounting a confrontation he had with Peter while the two of them were together in Antioch. He includes this confrontation because it fits into the overall argument and purpose of his letter.

Paul responds to two conflicts in this section:

1. **The larger overall conflict:** *There was a particular group of men who saw themselves as sincere, devout followers of Christ. They advocated an interpretation of the gospel that Paul refers to as "another gospel." Paul confronts their perspective both in the immediate context of his response to Peter, and in the larger context of the letter to the Galatians.*
2. **Paul's conflict with Peter:** *Paul confronts Peter with how he responds to the gentiles when the party of the circumcision shows up on the scene.*

In Peter's response to the party of the circumcision and Paul's confrontation of Peter, we gain a much clearer understanding of Paul's real problem with the party of the circumcision and specifically why Paul refers to their perspective as "another gospel."

Read 2:11 – 13

Gal. 2:11 ¶ Now when Peter came to Antioch, I confronted him to his face, because he was in the wrong.

Gal. 2:12 Before certain men from James came, Peter used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and separate himself, fearing those who belong to the faction of the circumcision.

Gal. 2:13 And the remaining Jews followed his example of hypocrisy, such that even Barnabas joined them in their hypocrisy.

Gal. 2:14 But when I observed that they were not being straightforward with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of everyone, “If you, being an ethnic Jew, born and raised, are free to associate with and eat with Gentiles, contrary to the Jewish understanding of the Mosaic Law, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to adopt Jewish practices?”

Gal. 2:15 “You and I Peter were born and raised Jews, we are not lawless Gentile sinners;

Gal. 2:16 but having discovered that man is not rendered free of condemnation by virtue of his being what the Law requires, but in view of his belief in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be free of condemnation by virtue of our belief in Christ-and not by virtue of our achieving the goodness that the Law requires; since no human being shall be free of condemnation by virtue of his achieving goodness.

Gal. 2:17 “Now if, while seeking to be rendered free of condemnation as disciples of Christ, we have been determined to be sinners, does that mean that Christ is a proponent of sin? Not on your life!

Gal. 2:18 “For if I do anything to build up again those beliefs and attitudes, which I have previously brought down, it is then that I make myself to be a true transgressor.

Gal. 2:19 “Now, when personally confronted with the demands of the Law, I realized that I deserved eternal condemnation, with the result that I now stand to attain eternal Life by the mercy of God.

Gal. 2:20 I realize that the crucifixion of Christ depicts the condemnation that I in my sinfulness deserve, and consequently I no longer have the self-perception that, on the basis of my worthiness, I stand to attain eternal Life.

Yet, to my benefit, Christ lives, having been raised from the dead, and on the basis of this I now stand to inherit eternal Life, while remaining in the sinful condition endemic to my present physical existence.

I now live on the basis of my belief that Jesus is the Son of God, the one who loved me and delivered himself over to be killed on my behalf.

Gal. 2:21 “I do not regard as invalid the grace of God; for if freedom from condemnation is achieved through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.

The main characters in this drama:

Paul: Paul describes himself as “the apostle called by God to the gentiles”. He is the author of the letter to the Galatians and many of the letters in the New Testament.

Peter: An apostle to the Jews. Peter has lived most of his life in a Jewish community and his ministry has primarily been to Jewish Christians. He is the apostle who denied Christ three times. Peter is also the author of the New Testament letters I & II Peter.

The rest of the Jews: These are Jewish believers who were part of the larger Antioch community and who were present on this occasion.

The Gentiles: Which included. 1) Those gentiles who Peter had actually been dining with. 2) Those gentiles who may have observed Peter's behavior and Paul's subsequent confrontation.

James: James is Jesus' brother and a leading member of the Jewish Christian church at Jerusalem.

The faction/party of the circumcision:

- Were a group of devote Jews who insisted that gentile converts to the gospel 1) be circumcised, and 2) be required to keep the Mosaic Covenant, if they were to be regarded as true believers in Jesus Christ.
- Made it their practice to follow after Paul and counteract his evangelistic efforts by teaching their perspective. Their mission was to make sure that gentile converts were correctly instructed in matters of the faith.
- Although Paul described this group as “men from James”, it is unlikely that James would have shared the same mindset of these men. Neither does it mean that James would have agreed with the teaching or attitude of these men.
- What is likely is that the members of this group felt at home in the believing community in Jerusalem; more importantly, the believing community had not shunned or excluded them.
- The party of the circumcision was “Christian” enough in their stated beliefs that they didn't attract any negative attention. They had been exposed to the apostolic teaching of the gospel. From all outward appearances, they were as Christian as you could get. In fact, they had the appearance that they were men who took their faith and righteousness very seriously.

If you were to sit down and have a theological conversation with them, they would tell you they believed that:

- Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God.
- Jesus was crucified for their sins and raised up in order that they might be freed from condemnation.
- Those who are followers of Jesus are free of condemnation on the basis of God's mercy. This mercy is based on Jesus' death on the cross.
- A person who is a true follower of Jesus will understand the need to be circumcised and keep the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant. This is because they believed that living righteously, or following the law, was a necessary condition for receiving eternal life.

So what was so wrong with the teaching of the Party of the Circumcision that would prompt Paul to refer to it as a false gospel?

- On one hand, Paul would very much agree with the party of the circumcision regarding the first three of these tenets.
- On the other hand, he would disagree with the party of the circumcision regarding the last tenet. That it was necessary for gentile believers to become circumcised and obey the Mosaic Law.

Many Bible students and modern day Christians have incorrectly understood Paul's conflict with the party of the circumcision. They have understood the purpose of Paul's letter to the Galatians to be a warning regarding the inaccurate theology of the party of the circumcision. So accordingly, the "false gospel" of the party of the circumcision was the fact that they believed that true followers of Christ must be circumcised and obey the Mosaic Law. In contrast to this theology Paul argues a theology of salvation in faith in Christ alone. So the essential argument and focus of the letter is understood as a theological disagreement regarding salvation by faith verses salvation by works.

Although requiring gentile converts to be circumcised and adhere to the Mosaic Law is a problem for Paul, it is not the reason that causes him to accuse this group of propagating a "false gospel."

- In Romans 14, Paul counsels mercy, tolerance, respect and understanding toward people who share the same belief as the party of the circumcision. Yet, he doesn't charge them with teaching or believing in a false gospel.
- One sees in the background of Romans 14 a cultural conflict. On the one hand, there is a group of Gentile believers who never have been enculturated into the consciousness advocated by the Jews. On the other hand, there is a group of Jewish believers who have deeply engrained religious sensitivities stemming from their lifetime of training in the Mosaic Covenant.
- In that context, the brother in Christ whose convictions ("faith") are faulty ("weak") is the one who has inadequate beliefs with respect to just such issues. The "weaker brother" believes that he can eat only vegetables (presumably, rather than risk eating meat offered to idols). He also believes that he must treat the Sabbath day differently than other days.

- In this context, Paul is counseling his readers how to respond to and think about one another when these two very different visions of righteousness come into conflict with one another.
- From Paul's perspective, the Gentile believers who have not been enculturated into the distinctive Jewish practices have a deeper, more accurate, and more enlightened understanding of the nature of true righteousness than do Jewish believers who remain trapped in their cultural perspective as Jews.
- Paul is suggesting to his fellow kinsmen—because of the light brought to the Jews by Christ— their understanding of righteousness ought to change in the face of this new teaching by Jesus. Paul would say, “We Jews are no longer under the same obligations to the Mosaic Covenant that we thought we were under before Christ came and taught us what God's purpose's are.”
- Accordingly, the Gentiles have a better (“stronger”) grasp of what it means to pursue righteousness than do the thoroughly enculturated Jews. For they can more readily get past the obsolete requirements imposed on Jews by the Mosaic Covenant; they never have been subject to them.
- Paul's clear and compassionate counsel to these more enlightened Gentiles is to **not** hold their Jewish brethren in contempt for their less enlightened understanding. However mistaken their ultimate understanding of what God wants, they are perfectly well intentioned, Paul argues. They keep the Sabbath, refrain from eating meat, and do every other Jewish thing they do, in order to manifest their gratitude to God. That is not something to hold them in contempt for; that is something to respect and applaud.

Why does Paul not take his own advice when it comes to his response to the Circumcision Party in Galatians?

- Paul responds to the circumcision party radically different from how he counsels his believing readers in Romans 14. His letter to the Galatians is dramatic and confrontational. He rejects their perspective, calling it a “false gospel.”
- Are they not simply “weaker brothers”? What is the difference in the circumstances of Romans 14 and Galatians? It must be the case that the situations are radically different. The key to understanding Galatians, therefore, is to understand the difference in circumstances.
- **In the context of his account of Peter’s decision** to withdraw from eating with the gentiles and his response to Peter, **Paul makes clear** exactly what he is labeling as the “other gospel”. As we shall see it is not because he has a theological disagreement regarding faith verses works with the party of the circumcision.

Lets look at Paul's conflict with Peter. 2:11-13

Gal. 2:11 ¶ Now when Peter came to Antioch, I confronted him to his face, because he was in the wrong.

Gal. 2:12 Before certain men from James came, Peter used to eat with the gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and separate himself, fearing those who belong to the faction of the circumcision.

Gal. 2:13 And the remaining Jews followed his example of hypocrisy, such that even Barnabas joined them in their hypocrisy.

Prior to the men from James coming to Antioch, it was Peter's practice to associate with and eat with gentiles. But when the faction of the circumcision showed up on the scene, Peter began to withdraw and separate himself from the gentile believers.

Paul makes several observations about Peter's decision to separate himself from eating with gentile believers.

1. Paul uses the term ***hypocrisy*** to describes Peter's behavior.
2. Peter's decision to withdraw and separate himself from the gentiles he was previously comfortable eating with **came out of fear**. The faction of the circumcision intimidated him. For some reason he was afraid of them.
3. Paul observes that Peter's actions have serious consequences. Barnabas, Paul's own partner in ministry as well as the rest of the Jews, followed his lead, and joined Peter in ***hypocrisy*** as well.

Why does Paul use the term hypocrisy to describe Peter's response to those of the circumcision?

1. Define hypocrisy

In our culture, we typically think of “hypocrisy” as not practicing what we preach. We understand hypocrisy to be the pretense of our telling other people how they ought to conduct their lives while not consistently living those beliefs ourselves. Hypocrisy is asserting one thing and doing another while not being forthright about it.

In the 1st century, however, the word translated “hypocrisy” had a different meaning. The term has its origins in the Greek theater. It was used to describe an actor who portrayed a character in a play.

According to Paul, by withdrawing and separating himself from the gentiles, Peter is acting out a script. And it is the fear of the party of the circumcision's ridicule and judgment that motivates his play-acting.

What script is Peter acting out?

By withdrawing and separating himself from the gentiles, Peter acts as though he believes what those of the circumcision party believe. He acts out a script that says that you are an authentic disciple of Jesus only if you live in conformity to the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant. Which would include that you don't eat with gentiles.

2. What did Peter have to be afraid of in the party of the circumcision?

- a. After reporting the experience of his revelation from God and his personal interaction with Cornelius, Peter had been severely rebuked by the party of the circumcision. They had chastised him for violating the Mosaic Law by associating with and eating with Gentiles.
- b. Peter did not want their judgment or ridicule. He did not want to feel the emotional discomfort of their unmerciful, intimidating, judgmental finger pointing at him telling him that he was a transgressor.

Raft trip illustration:

As many of you know I have been an avid white water rafter for some time. About fifteen years ago I was invited to go on a raft trip down the Rogue River. I have been rafting as often as possible ever since. After a day on the river, we usually sit around, play cribbage, tell river stories or have a discussion about a biblical passage or topic.

On one of these trips, while eating dinner, the topic of alcohol came up. I had been on many river trips and until that point, and had noticed that no one had ever brought any alcohol. As the discussion continued, it became clear that these men had based their decision not to bring alcohol on one thing: their fear that a fellow rafter would rebuke and rejection them. It wasn't because he was an alcoholic and they wanted to be sensitive to a problem he might have. It was because they were afraid of his disapproval. They were simply intimidated by the fear of their friend's judgment.

That is the same fear that motivates Peter to withdraw from the gentiles.

In Luke 12 Jesus warns his disciple's regarding hypocrisy and the underlying fear that motivates it.

Luke 12:4,5 And I say to you my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that they have no more that they can do. But I will tell you whom to fear: Fear the One who after He has killed has the authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!

The goal of any actor's performance is to win the approval and applause of his audience. This desire for approval/applause motivated actors to work many long and hard hours at developing their craft.

In contrast, one of the greatest fears of any actor was the potential rejection from his audience if his performance failed to be compelling or convincing. This fear of potential rejection motivated actors to invest a tremendous amount of time and energy in developing their craft and preparing for a performance.

In verses four and five Jesus makes a connection between the actor who is motivated by the fear of failing to perform well before his audience, and the Pharisees whose approach to their faith was motivated by **“the fear of men,”** rather than, **“the fear of God.”** He says,

Like the actor who was motivated by the fear of his audiences criticism, the Pharisees fear of the displeasure of their human audience preceded their desire to know and understand God. It was this fear of disapproval that motivated the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Jesus warns His disciples that being motivated out of this kind of fear was not the way to go, because men are limited in the harm they can cause you, while God is not.

In the context of Galatians, Peter doesn't even believe what the party of the circumcision believes. But he acts like he does. His decision is not born out of conviction. His decision is born out of fear and his desire to avoid experiencing the discomfort of their unmerciful judgment.

3. His decision has serious consequences. Peter is an apostle and he is acting like he believes the false gospel of the party of the circumcision. His decision has consequences beyond himself, because others follow his lead.

Paul confronts Peter: 2:14

*Gal. 2:14a But when I observed that they were **not being straightforward** with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter **in front of everyone**, “If you, being an ethnic Jew, born and raised, are free to associate with and eat with Gentiles, contrary to the Jewish understanding of the Mosaic Law, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to adopt Jewish practices?”*

Three observations:

1. Paul describes the actions of the group as “**not being straightforward** with the gospel”.

This is a term that has moral connotations: It carries the idea of not acting in conformity with the truth, not walking in a straight course, metaphorically, not acting or walking uprightly. In other words Peter is doing something inconsistent with what he knows is right.

2. Paul confronts Peter in front of everyone present. Including the party of the circumcision.

He makes a statement to Peter in the form of a rhetorical question.

“Peter, your actions here are inconsistent. You are not acting consistent with what you know to be the true gospel. How can you as a Jew have the freedom to eat with and associate with gentiles, and at the same time demand that they adopt Jewish practices? You are not acting straightforward with the gospel.”

Paul presents his argument to Peter:

Gal. 2:15 “***You and I, Peter, were born and raised Jews, we are not lawless gentile sinners;***

Gal. 2:16 ***but having discovered that man is not rendered free of condemnation by virtue of his being what the Law requires, but in view of his belief in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be free of condemnation by virtue of our belief in Christ-and not by virtue of our achieving the goodness that the Law requires; since no human being shall be free of condemnation by virtue of his achieving goodness.***

1. **Peter you and I** are born and raised Jews, we are not without the Law like the Gentiles.
2. **As Jews who know the Law we** have discovered that no one can escape condemnation by virtue of meeting the moral requirements of the Law.
3. **We** are free of condemnation only through belief in Christ death.
4. **Consequently, you and I** have come to personally trust in Christ’s death that we might be free from condemnation not by virtue of our achieving the goodness that the Law requires;
5. **Because we know** that no human being shall escape condemnation by virtue of his or her achieving goodness.

Paul goes on with his argument:

Gal. 2:17 “Now if, while seeking to be rendered free of condemnation as disciples of Christ, we have been determined to be sinners, does that mean that Christ is a proponent of sin? Not on your life!

Gal. 2:18 “For if I do anything to build up again those beliefs and attitudes, which I have previously brought down, it is then that I make myself to be a true transgressor.

1. If while, seeking to be rendered free of condemnation through trusting in Christ’s death we abandon the Law as the basis for achieving moral goodness, we put ourselves in the position of a gentile, (that is, without the Law), **does that make Christ a proponent of sin?**
2. **On the contrary**, there is no sin in abandoning the law as a means of achieving freedom from condemnation; rather there is sin by returning to the law as a means of achieving freedom from condemnation. It is by returning to that perspective that I make myself a true transgressor.

In verses 19 & 20 Paul speaks personally about his relationship to the Law:

Gal. 2:19 “Now, when personally confronted with the demands of the Law, I realized that I deserved eternal condemnation, with the result that I now stand to attain eternal Life by the mercy of God.

Gal. 2:20 I realize that the crucifixion of Christ depicts the condemnation that I in my sinfulness deserve, and consequently I no longer have the self-perception that, on the basis of my worthiness, I stand to attain eternal Life.

Yet, to my benefit, Christ lives, having been raised from the dead, and on the basis of this I now stand to inherit eternal Life, while remaining in the sinful condition endemic to my present physical existence.

I now live on the basis of my belief that Jesus is the Son of God, the one who loved me and delivered himself over to be killed on my behalf.

1. Paul had a **personal inward crisis** when he came to realize the actual demands of the Law.
2. He **realized** that he **could not keep the moral demands** the law required in order to be free from condemnation.
3. **Consequently**, he realized that he **deserved eternal condemnation**.
4. This inward, existential realization **had the effect** that he **came to trust in the mercy of God** for freedom from condemnation and eternal life rather than the law.
5. **Consequently**, his **faith in God's mercy** had the result that he **stood to inherit eternal life**.
6. In addition, he realized that **the crucifixion of Christ depicted the very condemnation he deserved**.
7. Consequently, he **no longer had the self-perception** that he **stood to attain eternal life based on his ability to achieve moral goodness**.
8. He realized that **his being granted eternal life was based solely on Christ's death and resurrection**.
9. **Consequently**, he now **lives** his life based on his belief that **Jesus death was a manifestation of God's mercy on his behalf**.

Paul concludes his comments to Peter and summarizes what he has been saying:

Gal. 2:21 ***“I do not regard as invalid the grace of God; for if freedom from condemnation is achieved through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.***

- If freedom from condemnation is achieved through the Law, then **Christ death was pointless.**

Let me take a step back for a moment and put in perspective what Paul has been saying to Peter.

- Paul is responding to Peter’s decision to separate himself and withdraw from the gentiles.
- Peter’s decision comes out of intimidation and fear of being judged.
- Peter is responding to the party of the circumcision’s “ false gospel”

Paul’s response to Peter is:

- We have come to trust in Christ’s death for God’s mercy.
- Not our own ability to achieve the moral goodness the law requires.
- The crucifixion depicts the condemnation he deserved.
- He no longer had the self-perception that he stood to attain eternal life based on his ability to achieve moral goodness.
- Paul now lives his life based on his belief that Jesus’ death was a manifestation of God’s mercy on his behalf.

What, then, is the essence of belief in the gospel, for Paul, such that to fail to believe it would make one's belief in Jesus a "false gospel"?

In viewing the law as capable of freeing them from condemnation, in a sense, "completing" the work of Christ's death on the cross, the party of the circumcision were corrupting the pure gospel and influencing others to follow their teaching. For Paul, this was heresy. It had to be confronted and corrected. The party of the circumcision deluded themselves. Although they claimed to believe in the work of Christ on the cross, they did not desire mercy for others. In not extending mercy to others, they belied their true beliefs, for in their profound, secret hearts, they did not see their own need for mercy. Otherwise they would have shown mercy to Peter and the gentiles he was eating with.

Answer: the essential, necessary content of saving belief in the gospel is, for Paul, one's personal, internal existential embrace of the truth of one's own moral unworthiness and, consequently, of the need for the mercy of God as the basis for having hope of eternal Life.

How did Paul conclude that the members of the Circumcision Party did not have a commitment to this truth?

The Circumcision Party's unmerciful, condemning attitude toward those who failed to observe the non-essential, non-moral aspects of the Law (and we know that they had such an attitude; because it was the FEAR of such condemnation and scorn that drove Peter and the others to hypocrisy)

Therefore, anyone who adopts a condemning, unmerciful attitude toward others is likely not one who has understood and embraced the mercy of God himself.

Consequently, anyone who adopts a condemning, unmerciful attitude toward others for their failure to keep achieve moral goodness, in all likelihood, is a person who has not come to terms with his or her own moral depravity and need for God's mercy.

At the heart of the false gospel Paul makes clear in response to Peter is not a wrong understanding of doctrine, rather, at its core is a fallacious attitude toward one's own moral unworthiness and consequently toward ones need for God's mercy.

Evidence of ones passion for and value of righteousness in not measured by ones strivings toward religious disciplines or moral uprightness but by the recognition of ones personal, inward, existential need for God's mercy, and granting that same mercy to others.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lutheran pastor, author, and member of the World War II German resistance movement against the Nazis, wrote strongly of life in Christian community. In his work, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*, Bonhoeffer observes that in order to help us understand the true fellowship of believers, we must "be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves".

Further, he notes, "The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community the better for both". This disillusionment, not unlike what we may imagine Paul to have experienced with Peter, gives us the opportunity to see both our own sin and that of our brothers and sisters. With undeniable clarity, Bonhoeffer writes that when this occurs,

“...is not the sinning brother still a brother, with whom I, too, stand under the Word of Christ? Will not his sin be a constant occasion for me to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ? Thus the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed which really binds us together—the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.”

This is what Paul knew when he stated that on the cross, Christ took on the suffering and death that Paul realized he deserved, but Paul received mercy instead.

Galatians Chapter 2 Outline

I. Paul's conflict with the party of the circumcision:

- A. It is not a theological disagreement
- B. It is their not seeing their need for mercy and influencing others
- C. Intimidating those who do not comply with their view of the faith

II. Peter's conflict with the party of the circumcision is brought to light through his response:

- A. Peters hypocrisy
- B. Peters fear

III. Paul's response to Peter

- A. Mercy frees people from condemnation not law
- B. Law invalidates mercy

IV. Application

- A. Right doctrine does not necessarily correlate with genuine faith.
- B. Mercy received and extended to others is a sign of genuine faith.