

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON TWENTY-SEVEN)

“CONTENDING FOR THE GOSPEL”

(PART 13)

Brothers and sisters, in preparing for this evening, it occurred to me that before going any further, it might be helpful to remind ourselves of the context of our deliberations.

In previous Lessons we stated that in verses **11-21** of **Galatians** chapter **2**, the Apostle Paul continues the defense of his Apostolic Ministry and Message which he had begun in verse **11** of chapter **1**. He does so by informing his readers, not only of his independence of the Apostles in Jerusalem, but also of his exercise of authority, on a particular occasion, over Peter, whom most believers in the early church considered to be the preeminent Apostle.

In **Galatians 2:11-13**, we read of the circumstance that led to the confrontation between Paul and Peter, two of the “titans” of the early church:

11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he had clearly done wrong.

12 Until certain people came from James, he had been eating with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he stopped doing this and separated himself because he was afraid of those who were pro-circumcision.

13 And the rest of the Jews also joined with him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray with them by their hypocrisy.

In verse **12**, Paul informs his readers that, “*Until certain people came from James, [Peter] had been eating with the Gentiles.*” The Greek word translated “*eating with,*” literally means “to eat with someone, to take food together with.” The word speaks of an intimate association, indicating that Peter’s interaction with the Gentile believers in Antioch was one of close communion and genuine fellowship with persons whom he regarded as fellow believers in Christ. The word is in the **imperfect tense** implying that it was Peter’s regular practice to do so. It was a wonderful relationship that powerfully demonstrated the unifying effect of the Gospel on both Jewish and Gentile believers. But Peter’s subsequent actions began to call into question the truth of the unity that all believers have in Christ.

When the brethren from Jerusalem came to Antioch, Peter stopped eating and fellowshiping with the Gentile believers and separated himself from them. When a Jew refused to eat with a Gentile, he did this in obedience to Jewish rituals. Peter had already learned that obedience to these rituals was not essential for salvation or sanctification, for either Jews or Gentiles. He had stopped keeping these Jewish rituals for himself, but now he acted as if he did keep them, so as to accommodate the legalism of those who came from Jerusalem. By his actions, Peter implied that Gentiles believers must keep the Law when he himself did not. This was hypocrisy and a repudiation of the truth of the Gospel!

The effect of Peter’s withdrawal was that the other Jewish members of the congregation, including Paul’s co-labourer Barnabas, likewise began to dissociate themselves from the Gentile members. The church was split wide open on the issue. The love-feast, that bond of fellowship expressive of Christian love amongst believers in Christ, was divided

into two groups. The friendly groups of Jews and Gentiles in the fellowship of the homes were discontinued.

Paul says that Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish believers were guilty of hypocrisy. The word “*hypocrisy*” is the translation of a Greek word which literally means, “to answer from under,” as an actor who speaks from behind a mask. The actor hid his or her true self behind the role he or she was playing. The word speaks of the act of concealing one’s real character under the guise of conduct implying something different. It usually referred to the act of concealing wrong feelings or character under the pretense of better ones.

Peter and the other Jewish believers’ actions of withdrawing from the Gentile believers in Antioch was hypocritical because it concealed their genuine belief that an individual is saved only by grace through faith, without the addition of works of any kind, and that such an individual is preserved in his or her relationship with God in the same way. By characterizing their actions as hypocrisy, Paul implied that there had been no real change of **conviction** on the part of the Jewish believers, but only a change of **conduct** that misrepresented their true convictions. He charged them with pretending that their change of attitude toward the Gentiles was the expression of loyalty to the Law of Moses, whereas it was really the outcome of their fear of the Judaizers.

There is no doubt that Peter’s action and that of the Jewish minority had a serious negative impact on the Gentile believers in Antioch. It implied that Gentile believers were second-class citizens in God’s kingdom. But Paul saw more than the momentary hurt, and the hypocrisy. Paul saw the deadly intrusion of works into the Gospel message. He realized that this was no small matter but that the message of the Gospel was in jeopardy! He saw this for exactly what it was—a dangerous detour from the truth of the Gospel. And so he reacted. He confronted Peter publicly, and charged him with hypocrisy.

In verses **14-21**, Paul explains the justification for his rebuke of Peter. In verse **14** he writes, “*But when I saw that they were not behaving*

consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, 'If you, although you are a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you try to force the Gentiles to live like Jews?'

Because of the gravity of the situation, Paul had to confront Peter publicly. He spoke to him, *"in front of them all."* It is apparent that Paul's rebuke of Peter was not given before the officers of the church only, or before a specially convened and restricted number of people, but before all the members of the Antioch church, both Jew and Gentile, who were present.

Paul, in confronting Peter directly, addresses his inconsistency in withdrawing from the Gentiles, for by so doing Peter was saying indirectly that they Gentiles had to obey the Levitical legislation regarding foods in order to be considered acceptable to the Jews and more importantly to God. By his action, Peter left the Gentile believers with only one of two choices in the situation, either to refuse to obey the Law in this respect and thus cause a split in the Christian Church, or to preserve harmony by coming under the Law, which would be to give credence to "another" gospel. They would now feel like they must live like Jews in order to be sure of both their justification and sanctification. Such a works based, performance driven, legalistic mindset was and is still, the absolute antithesis of the truth of the Gospel.

In verses **15** and **16**, Paul continues his response to Peter. He says,

15 We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners,

16 yet we know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

In these verses, Paul makes the point to Peter that, notwithstanding the fact that they are both Jews by birth, and therefore not regarded as "sinners" in the same sense as the Gentiles, they understood from

Scripture and their own experience, that sinners, whether Jew or Gentile, could not be justified by the works of the Law, but only by faith in Jesus Christ.

In verse 17 Paul writes, *“But if while seeking to be justified in Christ we ourselves have also been found to be sinners, is Christ then one who encourages sin? Absolutely not!”*

Paul is reminding Peter here that they, together with Barnabas and the other Jewish believers in Antioch, had been justified by faith alone in Christ alone, in the same way that the Gentile believers had been justified. Thus the Jewish believers were shown to be sinners in the same class as the Gentiles.

Understanding that they were justified by faith alone, the Jewish believers had exercised their freedom in Christ to live like Gentiles and not like Jews. They were eating with the Gentile believers and perhaps disregarding other portions of the Mosaic Law as well. In doing so, they would have been considered to be “sinners” and “unclean,” from the perspective of the Judaizers. In the eyes of the Judaizers, the Jewish believers in Antioch had put themselves outside the Mosaic covenant, as the Gentiles were. As far as the Judaizers were concerned, Peter and the other Jewish believers were guilty of **antinomianism** or lawlessness.

Paul is making the point to Peter that if indeed the Judaizers are correct in their doctrine that believers are saved in part by keeping the ceremonial Law of Moses and continue to be bound by that Law to maintain their salvation, then he, Peter, Barnabas, and all the other Jewish believers, had fallen back into the category of sinners by eating and fellowshiping with the Gentile believers, even before the Judaizers arrived in Antioch.

He also argues that if the Jewish believers became sinners because of eating and fellowshiping with the Gentile believers, then Jesus Christ Himself would be a minister of sin, for in **Mark 7:14-19**, He had made it very clear that no food can contaminate a person in a spiritual sense,

because food cannot affect the heart. Therefore, if the Judaizers were right, then the Lord Jesus was wrong.

The argument of the opponents of the Gospel of grace in Paul's day was that if people are not under some system of law then they will sin freely. They reasoned that people could believe in Christ but then live as they wanted and by their sinful actions make Christ a promoter of sin. The same argument is used by the opponents of the Gospel of grace today. But such a conclusion is false because Christ dealt with the sin issue on the Cross! Paul finds such a view utterly repulsive and answers this accusation with an emphatic, "***Absolutely not!***"

When God declares a person right in His eyes by faith alone, this does not cause him or her to gravitate towards sin. The grace of God leads to freedom from sin's slavery to obey God, not license to disobey him. The principle of grace does not endorse lawlessness. On the contrary it promotes genuine holiness.

It is the person who goes back to the Law seeking to build up again the legalistic decrees done away in Christ, who is the real violator of the Law. And so Peter's vacillating conduct of going back to the Old Testament distinctions of meats in Antioch made him a transgressor. Christ is not the promoter of sin. It is Peter, by his conduct who is really the promoter of sin. Peter's return to legalism was an attack on the grace of God!

Paul emphasizes this in verse **18**. He writes, "*But if I build up again those things I once destroyed, I demonstrate that I am one who breaks God's law.*"

The Amplified Bible translates the verse as follows, "*For if I [or anyone else should] rebuild [through word or by practice] what I once tore down [the belief that observing the Law is essential for salvation], I prove myself to be a transgressor.*"

The phrase, "*build up again*" or "*rebuild,*" is a translation **of the Greek word oikodomeó: (oy-kod-om-eh,-o)**, which means, "to build a

house, erect a building; to restore by building, to rebuild, repair.” In this context in connection with the Mosaic Law, **oikodomeó** means, “to render or declare valid.” In short, Paul refers to the “rebuilding” of the legalistic decrees of the Mosaic Law and the strict observance of them as the means by which one is justified, something which he clearly stated in verse **16** to be impossible!

The Greek word translated “*destroyed*” or “*tore down,*” is **kataluó**: (**kat-al-oo’-o**), which means, “to destroy, demolish, throw down; to overthrow, i. e. to render vain, to deprive of success, to bring to naught.” When **kataluó** is applied to the Law as in this context, it means “to deprive of force, to abrogate.”

What had Paul “destroyed?” He had “destroyed” the system of works-based salvation, the system that as a Pharisee of Pharisees he had clung to as the means of achieving personal righteousness. That false system was torn down by the Gospel of the grace of God which he now wholeheartedly embraced and proclaimed.

Paul is really referring to Peter’s action of declaring the Levitical legislation regarding the eating of food, null and void by his eating with the Gentiles, and then declaring it valid by his act of withdrawing from that fellowship. But he tactfully puts himself into the picture and supposes a hypothetical case by using the first personal pronoun “**I.**” His argument is to the effect that instead of a person becoming a transgressor by **abandoning** the Law for grace, he or she becomes a transgressor by **returning** to the Law which he or she had abandoned when he or she believed in Christ alone for his or her salvation.

By preaching the Gospel of grace and salvation by faith alone, in Christ alone, Paul had in effect “destroyed” (deprived of force, rendered vain, abrogated), the false Jewish notion that a person could be justified or declared righteous by keeping the Law. For him or anyone else to now return to, or “build up again” that false teaching, for example by acting in a similar manner as Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish believers,

would be for him to transgress or deviate from the clear truth of the Gospel.

Commenting on this verse, **John MacArthur** makes the following statement:

"In other words, if anyone...tries to rebuild a system of legalism after he has once destroyed it by believing and preaching the gospel of God's powerful grace and man's sinful helplessness, he proves **himself**, not **Christ**, to be a transgressor. He proves himself to be a hypocrite and a sinner by abandoning grace for law."

According to **Acts 10**, Peter had actually been the one who had originally torn down the distinctions between Jew and Gentile when he entered the house of Cornelius. Verses **27** and **28** clearly indicate that Peter understood that this was what he was doing:

27 Peter continued talking with him as he went in, and he found many people gathered together.

28 He said to them, "You know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile, yet God has shown me that I should call no person defiled or ritually unclean.

(New English Translation)

When he returned to Jerusalem after the conversion of Cornelius and his relatives and friends, the leaders and other members of the Jerusalem church criticized him for entering Cornelius' house and eating with him and the other Gentiles who were there. In **Acts 11:1-4** we read the following:

1 Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles too had accepted the word of God.

2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers took issue with him,

3 saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and shared a meal with them."

4 But Peter began and explained it to them point by point...

(New English Translation)

Peter, by his Christian profession, had demonstrated that he was persuaded that justification was by faith alone, in Christ alone, and by eating with Gentile believers he had declared that the Mosaic Law was no longer binding upon him as a Jew, nor was it binding upon the Gentiles. He had thus, figuratively, destroyed or torn down the Law as a standard of Christian faith and conduct. Unfortunately by his subsequent refusal to eat with the Gentiles he had retracted this declaration, and asserted that the Law was still binding upon believers, and thus he was building up again what he had torn down. By so doing, he was proving himself to be a transgressor.

If Paul allowed Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish Christians to go back on the Gospel, and thereby on the centrality of faith and the Cross, then he would join them and the Judaizers as the true “lawbreakers” or “transgressors.”

Brothers and sisters, while this issue may seem to have more historical than contemporary significance, the implications are just as important for our day as they were in Paul’s day. It is the Gospel that is at stake. There is a continuing tendency in all religions to develop a salvation system based on works-righteousness: the belief that if we are only good enough and can follow the demands of our religious system well enough, we can achieve our own salvation. Sadly, this tendency is followed by many professing Christians as well. The basic error in these systems of religion is that the whole process centers on the “**I**,” on the hope that **I** can through **MY** own efforts somehow earn my salvation. The heart of sin is the worship of self, and **I**, as egotistical as **I** am, do not want to depend for my salvation on God and what he has done. **I** must make a vital contribution; **I** must receive some of the glory!

Paul will respond to this tendency in verses **19-21** which, Lord willing, we will examine next week.

