

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL LETTERS TO GOD’S PEOPLE THE GOD WHO DIRECTS HIS PEOPLE *Toward Faithfulness in the Gospel*

Today, we begin a study of Letters to God’s People as found in the New Testament. Our study will include letters from Paul, Peter, John, and James – letters written by these men of God to early Christians that are so timeless that God Himself preserved these letters and included them in His Holy Word for the direction and encouragement of His children throughout the generations. We will begin by looking into how God directs His people toward faithfulness in the gospel.

We have previously studied about the Antioch Church in Syria. It was the place where followers of Christ were first called ‘Christians’ and it even became the missionary ‘headquarters’ for Paul. When we think of Antioch, we might even start believing it was a ‘perfect’ church. But, since imperfect people were there, it wasn’t. Peter caused a problem that had to be addressed. Why would Peter, the man who had personally spent three years walking closely to Jesus, cause a problem within the church fellowship? The best answer might be – Peter was human! We all make mistakes at times. That is why as fellow believers we need to: **Challenge one another to walk in line with the gospel.**

Read Galatians 2:11-14 (ESV) 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?”*

Paul wanted the Galatians to know the truth that salvation is by grace alone. In his letter, Paul briefly shared stories from his early Christian days for the purpose of defending the gospel. One of the stories Paul recounted was his confrontation with Peter over the purity of the faith. He refers to Peter as Cephas. Cephas is Aramaic for Rock – the name that Christ personally gave the fisherman called Simon. Cephas in Greek is Petros which in English is Peter. It is good to know that the friendship between these two brothers in Christ was so strong that it withstood this necessary confrontation.

We have previously studied how ‘legalists’ went from the mostly Jewish Jerusalem Church to the mostly Gentile Antioch Church telling them they needed to follow the law and be circumcised in order to be saved. They even had a meeting over the situation and during the meeting, Peter said concerning the folks in Antioch in **Acts 15:8-9 (ESV)** ⁸ *And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us,* ⁹ *and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.* James

along with Peter and the others concluded that circumcision was not necessary for salvation. ***Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV)*** ⁸ *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,* ⁹ *not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

When Peter came to the Antioch congregation, at first he ate with them even though they were not circumcised. To 'eat with the Gentiles' meant to accept Jew and Gentile as one in the family of God. But, when some Jews showed up from Jerusalem, Peter quit eating with the Gentiles and began hanging with the Jews. James was a strict Jew even though he was a Christian believer. Paul does not suggest that James sent these men to investigate Peter, or even that they were officials of the Jerusalem church. No doubt they belonged to the "circumcision party" and wanted to lead the Antioch church into religious legalism. They professed to be Christians, but they were overly enamored with *law*. In other words, they were *legalists*. In the eyes of such people, God's grace and man's faith are *insufficient* to bring about one's salvation.

We always need to be aware of the consequences of how our actions affect others whether we are acting legalistic or just being thoughtless. For example, we may crowd in at a table to sit with 'our friends' during a fellowship while leaving a couple of visitors or newcomers sitting by themselves at a table.

Peter in his mind probably justified his staying away from the Gentiles as promoting harmony. But Paul charged that Peter's action violated the gospel. By leaving his place among the Gentiles and joining the legalists, Peter was showing support for their claim that Christ was not sufficient for salvation. And in doing so, he was leading others to do the same including Barnabas of all people. We have already heard so much 'good' concerning Barnabas – but here we find Barnabas giving over to either peer pressure or prejudice. The Lord only knows if he did it on purpose. But, whether he did it on purpose or not – he still followed Peter in doing something wrong.

Remember we are justified by faith, not works.

Read Galatians 2:15-18 (ESV) 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.* ¹⁷ *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!* ¹⁸ *For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.*

The first requirement for becoming a Christian is awareness that we are sinners. The human tendency is to call others sinners but not to confess our own sinfulness. The Jews of Paul's day considered the words sinner and Gentile to be the same. Paul insisted that Jews were also sinners. In fact, it is an inherited disease from the first man, Adam. Because we have all been infected by sin since birth, we cannot keep God's laws perfectly. There is no human way to become sinless. Fortunately, God has provided a way of salvation that depends on Jesus Christ, not on our own efforts. Even though we know this truth, we must guard against the temptation of using service, good deeds, charitable giving, or any other effort as a substitute for faith. Faith is how we are justified

– our faith in Christ is how we are declared righteous. We do good works because of our faith! **Ephesians 2:10 (ESV)** ¹⁰ *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

Peter's actions were harmful to the salvation of others and Paul knew that he could not remain silent. How do we recognize when we are in a situation where we should not remain silent? Evangelicals have often grouped doctrines into a few categories to help make this distinction.

1. **Core Doctrines** – These are the doctrines vital to the gospel and Christian faith such as Jesus is the only way to heaven, we are saved by grace not works, Jesus is God's Son who died on the cross to save us from our sins and the choice is ours to accept Him as Savior, the Word of God is infallible, heaven is a real place and so is hell.
2. **Convictions** – These are important but not essential for salvation. This is where different denominations come into being. Some baptize by immersion, others by sprinkling. Some take the Lord's Supper every Sunday, others not so often. Believers who share belief in the core doctrines can be brothers and sisters in Christ. However, I do not recommend that they attend the same church in order to not cause divisions within the local church.
3. **Preferences** – These distinctions often refer to personal preferences found in local congregations. Too many churches become divided over preferences that have nothing to do with core doctrines. Satan loves preferences! Probably the most common preference we see today in church families is the differences in worship styles.

We don't have to 'know much' to become a Christian. **John 3:16 (ESV)** ¹⁶ *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.* However, we need to grow in our faith and learn to recognize false doctrine and when the need arises, we should be prepared to stand firm for the core beliefs of Christianity knowing that it is a life and death matter. We don't need to proselytize and try to change people in other denominations who happen to have different convictions and we need to learn to get along with folks in our own church body who may have different preferences.

Now back to Paul's confrontation of Peter. At the Jerusalem Conference, Peter had compared the Mosaic Law to a burdensome yoke. At Antioch, he put himself under that impossible yoke. Paul repeats three times that we are justified by faith and not by works. Charles Swindoll says, “The most dangerous heresy on earth is the emphasis on what we do for God instead of what God does for us.”

David Jeremiah says, “Critics who have not experienced grace often attack it as a license for sin. Paul was horrified that some might think that faith in Christ somehow encouraged people to sin.” **Romans 6:1-2 (ESV)** ¹ *What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?* ² *By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?* Jeremiah goes on to say, “It is not only a person's standing before God that changes when he or she is declared righteous; he or she is radically changed. “ **2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV)** ¹⁷ *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*

Recognize that holiness is possible only when we are in Christ.

Read Galatians 2:19-21 (ESV) ¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, so 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 righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

It was the purpose of the Old Testament law to bring us to the threshold of the gospel of grace. The Old Testament points to Christ. The Old Testament Law administers death while the grace of Jesus provides life! It is Christ who brings us past the threshold and through His door of grace freeing us from the penalty of the law which is death. How do we know? The Bible tells us so!

Romans 6:11 (ESV) ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Romans 6:14 (ESV) ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Romans 7:4 (ESV) ⁴ Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.

Romans 8:2 (ESV) ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

We have been given the gift of God's grace and it is our mission, our command to be faithful and share His message not only in our words but in our works.

It is possible that there might come a day when it is necessary to address a problem with someone within the church body attacking the core values held by our local church. However, I suspect that is not the biggest danger we face. Something David Jeremiah said in his sermon on 'The Faithful Church – Philadelphia' caught my attention. He said, "It is not enough to have the Word of God. It is not enough to believe the truth. It is not enough to have doctrine so that you know what you believe and why. If you have all of that and the opportunity is there and you are not ready to accept that opportunity for God, the church will die because the thing that will kill a church is if it becomes an inbred group of people who just sit around and talk about their prophetic understanding and their knowledge of doctrine and never go through the open door to reach the regions beyond which they are the key." When I stand before Jesus, I know that He will welcome me because I am covered in His righteousness but the big question is, "Will I hear Him say, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant?'"

Jeremiah concluded his message with some inspiring words from an old southern preacher that I would like to end this lesson with. The old preacher said, "It is time for our church to wake up and sing up and preach up and pray up and pay up and never give up or let up or back up or shut up until the church is built up or we go up!"