2-23-25

Galatians 2:11-21 (1)

As we read the letter to the Galatians, we see that Paul is fighting a battle on two fronts. There are people who have come to the Galatian churches instructing the Christians that they must follow the law of Moses in addition to having faith in Jesus Christ. They are called Judaizers because they are trying to turn the Gentiles Christians into Jews; make them proselytes. Paul is forced to defend his authority as an apostle because these Judaizers are claiming that his teaching is not up to par with the apostles who followed Jesus during His earthly ministry. Also, he is defending the true Gospel because these people are teaching a distorted view of it; in other words, no Gospel at all.

So far, Paul has expressed amazement that the Galatians have abandoned God so quickly, after all that the Almighty has done for them. He has made it known that those who are giving this errant teaching are to be accursed to an eternity in hell. He has reminded them that the Gospel he preached to them had been given to him by none other than Jesus Christ Himself. He let them know that he had been in touch with the Jerusalem apostles and there was no difference in their presentation of the Gospel. Now, Paul is recounting a time where he had to harshly engage Peter in front of everyone in the Antioch church.

Many of the verses in our passage for today are difficult. They are difficult to translate from the Greek and they can be difficult to understand as we read them. There are also many things we would like to know about what happened here that we aren’t told. In spite of all that, we can get the point of what is being said; plus, I really think that knowing some of the details of what happened here would be a distraction from what the Holy Spirit has for us in this passage.

Paul begins verse 11 by referring to a time when Cephas, or the apostle Peter, came to the church at Antioch. There were a couple different places named “Antioch” that had churches in them; this one is in Syria. The church in Syrian Antioch was basically Paul’s home church. He worshiped and prayed here; and he preached and taught here. But it was also the church that sent him out on his missionary journeys. A lesson for us is the importance of having a “home church”; a place to belong, to report to, to be accountable to.

Peter came to visit the church in Antioch. We don’t know why or when or how long he stayed. We don’t know how long he had been there before this confrontation took place. Regardless, at some point, Paul opposed him to his face. Right there in front of everybody, Paul chewed out the apostle Peter. Why? Paul said Peter stood condemned; your translation might say something like “because he was wrong”. In any case, the literal translation is “he stood condemned before God”. Peter’s actions were serious and they desperately needed corrected in no uncertain terms and right in front of everybody. It was so serious because, as we will see, Peter’s actions supported the false Gospel of the Judaizers.

I must admit, my first reaction is “Poor Peter”. All through the Gospel accounts, this guy was usually the first to mess up; the first to put his foot in his mouth. Still, Jesus called him to be “first among equals” of the apostolic band. He got to preach the first sermon at Pentecost where 3000 were saved; he got the be with the first Samaritans who were saved and then the first Gentiles. He was definitely pillar of the Christian church and used mightily by God. And here he is again getting a tongue lashing in front of everybody. I think we can all relate to Peter.

In verse 12, Paul recounts what it was that Peter did. Apparently, at first, Peter had no problem sharing meals with the Gentile Christians there at Antioch. Which is exactly the way it should have been. Under the Law of Moses, there were dietary restrictions and issues of ceremonial uncleanness. Sharing a meal with Gentiles would have put both of these at risk; so the Jews wouldn’t eat with Gentiles. But with Christ, Paul explains in Ephesians 2:14, “*For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall*.”

Dietary restrictions were to show the separateness of God’s chosen people; Jesus ended that separation by making all Christians one people. He also abolished uncleanness by taking all uncleanness upon Himself, leaving we who are His clean. In Christ, there was no problem with Jews and Gentiles partaking together, regardless of who prepared the food or what it was.

Well, some folks came from the Jerusalem church and we can tell that these people would have been Judaizers. Paul says that they came from James; that would have been James, Jesus’ half-brother and the head of the Jerusalem church. While they probably did come from the church that James was head of; it is unlikely that James sent them with the intention of forcing the Gentiles to follow the Mosaic law. In Acts 15:24, James denies sending anyone for that purpose, although we don’t know if he is referring to this incident or not.

Consider for a moment what James had to deal with, as head of the Jerusalem church. While there were thousands of Jews who became followers of Christ, there were tens of thousands of Jews who did not; and they would have been hostile to the Christians. Those hostile included the religious leaders in powerful positions who could cause problems. Even in the church leadership he had to deal with a variety of viewpoints. There were scribes and Pharisees and those of the priestly class who had come to understand that Jesus was Messiah and followed Him; but some of them had a hard time letting go of the Mosaic law. James had to try to manage all that.

Anyway, when these people came to the church at Syrian Antioch, they wouldn’t eat with the Gentiles and Peter began to join them. We aren’t told why, other than for some reason Peter had some fear of them. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter. Peter began to shun the Gentile Christians. This is the Peter who fearlessly stood before the Sanhedrin and defied their orders; this is the Peter who had the vision of a sheet full of animals come from the sky and learned from God that all He created was clean; this is the Peter who then went into the house of the Gentile Cornelius and preached the Gospel. Of all people, he knew that there was no problem communing with the Gentile Christians.

Here is what we need to know. Each and every one of us is only one small step away from messing up. None of us, no matter how long we have been a Christian or what our position is in the church, can begin to think we have it made; that we are immune to grievous sin. We are all aware that we are sinners and that we fail daily; but I don’t think that we appreciate how much danger we are in of stepping off a precipice; of failing such that we cause great repercussions for many others. Our own pride will make us think that we are safe, but that just opens us up to our carnal desires. Worse still, satan and his demons are always looking for a way to trip us up. Keeping in mind what happened to Peter here, he knew very well what he was talking about when he wrote in his letter: *Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*.

So, what was the effect when the chief apostle fell into sin and turned away from fellowship with the Gentile Christians? First off, others followed him. That is one of the weights a leader must bear; people follow. And while that’s really the point of having a leader, if the leader or leadership goes astray then there are problems. Those who follow will go astray also. Paul says that when Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles, the other Jews in the church followed his example. It even got to the point that Barnabas, the son of encouragement, was led astray.

Now Paul doesn’t mention anything about the Gentile Christian’s reaction. But surely, they were hurt. Certainly they looked up to and respected the apostle Peter. How many times had Barnabas spoken gracious words to them to help them in their struggles with the surrounding Pagan population? How much had they learned from the other Jews about how the Old Testament pointed to the Christ? And now the Jews shunned them as if they were somehow tainted. Talk about a way to spilt a church!

And we must be careful here, as all church bodies must be careful, that we don’t form any little groups or clicks. Now it’s natural that some personalities will hit it off and form deeper friendships than others and there’s no problem with that. We must just be careful to keep fellowship with everyone here, respecting and caring for one another. In other words, maintaining Christian unity. I think we have that here; let’s just be sure to guard it carefully.

Paul accuses Peter and the rest of the Jews who followed him of hypocrisy. How was that so? It was established earlier in this letter that Peter and the other apostles and Paul all preached the same Gospel. That had not changed; Peter never faltered on the Gospel he shared when he spoke. The problem came with his actions. When Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles, he was complying with the Mosaic law. That thought probably never occurred to him; but that’s what he was doing. His actions said that you must follow the law of Moses in addition to faith in Christ. What he did reenforced exactly what the Judaizers were teaching. His actions proclaimed a false Gospel.

Because of this, Paul claims that they were not being straightforward with the truth of the Gospel. And they weren’t: the Gospel broke down the dividing wall and made Jew and Gentile one people. That is the power of the true Gospel.

No doubt, the Judaizers in Galatia had heard about what Peter did in Antioch; maybe they were even there. But they would have been happy to use this as an illustration that even the apostle Peter agreed with them. Paul shares this story with the Galatian church for two reasons. One is to reenforce that he is not inferior to the Jerusalem apostles or even to Peter. He was willing to stand up to Peter in front of everyone and he was right. But he is also showing the Galatians how wrong the teaching of the Judaizers is.

Once Paul sees what is going on and how damaging it is, he takes action. He confronts Peter in front of everyone and he begins by saying, “*If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?*” As I mentioned earlier, some of these verses are difficult to translate and to get the exact meaning of; this is one of them. But we can still get a couple of good ideas from it.

One way of looking at this is that Paul is saying that Peter is a Jew. There is no question about that. He was born into the Jewish nation and he was raised to follow the law of Moses. Now that he is a Christian however, he has been living like Gentile Christians; eating with them without being concerned about ceremonial cleanness. Other Jews were still following the law. So Peter was living like a Gentile and not like a Jew.

But now by his actions, he is showing the Gentiles that they must live like the Jews and follow the law of Moses. That is his hypocrisy: he lived like a Gentile, but now he is telling the Gentiles that they must live like Jews. No wonder Paul called him out. What Peter did was dangerous to all in the church of Antioch and could easily spread to other churches; like the one in Galatia.

Another way to consider what Paul said would be to say that Peter was living like a sinner while trying to compel the others to live righteously. Let me take that idea and rearrange it a little for ourselves. I need to ask myself, “If I, being Christian, live worldly, how can I tell the worldly to be Christian?” Now, let me ask you, “If you, being Christian, live worldly, how can you tell the worldly to be Christian?”

While we are saved by faith in Jesus and not works, as followers of Christ we are to be a people set apart. Are you set apart from the world? If you live just as the world does, your testimony for Jesus will be worthless. The world lives in sin. Christians will sin but we ought not be living in it. Consider Paul’s list in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, “*Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.*” And we understand from Jesus’ sermon on the mount that even dwelling on these things is equivalent to doing them.

We are to be citizens of the Kingdom of Christ and to accept any of these things as legitimate even while not participating is to place ourselves outside that Kingdom. We don’t want to be there; where there is darkness and wailing and gnashing of teeth. Stand firm on God’s word; don’t capitulate to the world’s brand of ethics. The two are mutually exclusive.

Prayer

Blessed Saviour, Your Gospel is precious and true; it tells us the only way to salvation and to everlasting life. Holy Spirit, keep the Gospel pure in our hearts. Give us discernment so that we are not deceived into accepting anything else; may we reject even the slightest variation.

Keep us from hypocrisy; may our actions closely follow the teachings of Your word. May Your word live in our hearts and minds and may we live Your word. Help us that we might be doers of Your word and not just hearers.

We ask Your Holy Spirit to keep a blessed Christian unity in this body; and may this unity grow ever stronger in Christ. Thank You for fellowship and may we be guided by kindness, mercy, and love.

We ask these things in the name of Jesus our Lord and Saviour

Amen