

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE GALATIANS
NO OTHER GOSPEL:
FREEDOM IN CHRIST

LESSON 5: "Guardians of the Gospel" **Date:** Sept 21/Oct 5, 2014

TEXT: Galatians 2:11-21

TEACHER TIP

Since the next several lessons will cover Paul's defense of justification by faith alone in chapters 3-4, the final main point of this lesson, which transitions into that defense, doesn't need to be belabored. For that reason, it is wise to focus your time on the first two main points, which are more unique and practical in their immediate application.

INTRODUCTION

Review: Paul's great epistle to the Galatian churches has three main sections: the priority of the gospel (1:1-2:10), the protection of the gospel (2:11-4:31), and the privileges of the gospel (5:1-6:18). Over the last four lessons, we explored the priority of the gospel, noting four applicational truths:

- Because of the nature of the gospel, I should prioritize the gospel by *praising* God (1:1-5).
- Because of the source of the gospel, I should prioritize the gospel by *proclaiming* it (1:6-12).
- Because of the goal of the gospel, I should prioritize the gospel by *producing* fruit (1:13-24).
- Because of the work of the gospel, I should prioritize the gospel by *partnering* with others (2:1-10).

Paul actually introduced the concept of protecting the gospel in 2:5—"to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you." Paul's preservation of the gospel is taken a step further in Galatians 2:11-21.

Illustration: On August 1 of this year, Marvel Studio's *Guardians of the Galaxy* hit the theaters with incredible success, grossing over \$620 million worldwide. The film features five unique characters—Peter Quill, the powerful Drax, the assassin Gamora, the genetically engineered raccoon Rocket, and the tree-like humanoid Groot—who band together and save the galaxy from the Ravagers. At the end of the movie, the

main character, Quill, learns that he is only half-human, and you are left to wonder what the future holds for this victorious guardian.

In contrast with that fantastical film, the passage before us is the very real story of another guardian. His mission isn't of a galactic nature, but it certainly is eternal. In this passage, we are introduced to Paul the Apostle, a guardian of the gospel. In this role, Paul teaches us that ***we must guard the gospel from all that might subvert it***, and he does so by confronting a misguided friend.

If ever it's difficult to stand firm, it is most certainly so in the face of a friend who is now opposing us or what we represent. Paul and Peter had become friends, for after all, Paul had stayed with Peter for fifteen days during his first visit to Jerusalem, shortly after his conversion (cf. 1:18). Then, fourteen years later, he again renewed fellowship with Peter in a partnership that provided much encouragement and proved ministry equality (cf. 2:1-10). Now, Peter is on Paul's home turf, having come to Antioch, and Paul finds himself in the uncomfortable position of having to "oppose" his friend "because he stood condemned" (v. 11) in his application of gospel truth. Paul refused to allow feelings and friendships to distract him from his commitment to guard (i.e., "preserve") "the truth of the gospel" (cf. 2:5).

As we will see, Peter's theological/practical error paralleled the false teaching that was infecting the Galatian churches. So, Paul shares this story of confrontation as a "trump card" against the Judaizers. See, these wolves had come to Galatia claiming support from the "influential" "pillars" in Jerusalem, including Peter. Not only was that a lie, but the opposite was actually true, for the Jerusalem apostles stood with Paul (cf. 2:1-10). Furthermore, the false teachers attacked Paul's authority, claiming various deficient sources and motives of his ministry.

Paul has been carefully developing his defensive argument. First, he revealed the divine source of his gospel (1:6-12). Then, he rehearsed the well-known transformation that had happened in his life as a result of that calling (1:13-24). Most recently, he unmasked the deception of the Judaizers and detailed how the Jerusalem leadership was in complete agreement with him in message, authority, and commission (2:1-10). Now, he climaxes his defense by recording an instance in which he had actually stood in public theological superiority to one of those "influential" "pillars," Peter (2:11-14). This story would thus serve to authenticate his authority and assault the influence of the false

teachers, while also providing instruction concerning the very issue that was troubling the Galatian believers—the nature of the true gospel.

So, while we have entered into Part 2 of this epistle, its connection to Part 1 is obvious. Indeed, we could add another point to our four applicational bullets above:

- Because of the subversion of the gospel, I should prioritize the gospel by *protecting* it (2:11-21).

Before we jump into our passage and learn how Paul stood as a guardian of the gospel, let's quickly make a couple of observations about the historical placement of this confrontation.

Background: We've noted in a previous lesson that many people equate Galatians 2:1-10 with the Jerusalem Counsel of Acts 15. We, however, have taken a different interpretation, harmonizing Galatians 2:1-10 with Paul's earlier famine visit to Jerusalem in Acts 11:27-30; 12:25. While many good reasons for this understanding can be offered,¹ our passage actually suggests two.

First, Peter's theological relapse (to a legalistic gospel) in Galatians 2:11-14 is more sensibly understood if it precedes the council of Acts 15, especially in light of his leadership at that event and his support of Paul (cf. vv. 6-12). While not impossible, it seems quite unlikely that Peter would have been so swift² and so obvious in his disregard of the Jerusalem Counsel's official and public decision (cf. Acts 15:22-31).³

Secondly, since this letter to the Galatian churches is dealing with the same issues as the Jerusalem Council, it would have been incredibly germane for Paul to reference here that official decision (recorded in Acts 15:22-29), like he did on his Second Missionary Journey (cf. Acts 16:4). The absence of any such reference—especially when it would have supported his defensive arguments in 1:6-2:14, his confrontation with Peter in 2:11-14, and his labor to protect the gospel's integrity over the next several chapters—suggests that the council had not yet convened. This is an argument from silence, but it is (in our opinion) "deafening silence."

So, we conclude that Peter's blunder occurred before the group decision of the Jerusalem Counsel, which makes Paul's personal

commitment to be a guardian of the gospel all the more exemplary for us. Knowing his Bible, he stood firm and resolute (**Illustration:** like Luther—"Here I stand...I can do no other"), not needing the verification of a group, in order to "preserve" "the truth of the gospel" (cf. 2:5).

Let's learn from this gospel guardian as we listen to his story of when he rebuked an erring friend. As we do so, let's pray for grace to continue Paul's legacy of guarding the gospel from all that might subvert it.

PETER'S ERROR (vv. 11-14a)

Paul writes, "But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 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. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But...I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel." Peter's error can be analyzed under three headings.

1. The sin (vv. 11-13a)

Paul states that Peter "stood condemned." This is a rare word, occurring infrequently in the New Testament and used sparingly throughout the Septuagint. It appears to have three related senses—to discern as wrong or bad (Deuteronomy 25:1), to scorn (Proverbs 28:11), and to despise or be ashamed particularly when judging oneself (Job 42:6; Ezekiel 16:61; 1 John 3:20). Paul is certainly not scorning Peter here, nor does it seem likely that he is emotionally despising his friend. Instead, he determines that what Peter is doing is in violation of "the truth of the gospel" (v. 14a) and is wrong. This wasn't just a mere mistake, a moment of forgetfulness, or an unintentional oversight—Peter's actions were sin!

Peter, the apostle to the Jews (v. 8), had come to clearly understand the unquestioned inclusion of the Gentiles into the church by grace alone through faith alone (cf. Acts 10; 11:1-18). After Peter's divine encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10), in which Peter was told from heaven, "What God has made clean, do not call common" (3x—10:15-16), the "circumcision party" in Jerusalem (cf. Galatians 2:12) confronted him for his lack of conformity to traditional Mosaic Law

(Acts 11:2-3). Peter proceeded to rehearse for them what God had done and told him in his interaction with the Gentiles. Peter related that God had told Cornelius that Peter would “declare to you a *message*”—not a work—“by which you will be saved” (11:14). Peter ended his explanation by asking, “If then God *gave* the same gift to them [i.e., the indwelling Holy Spirit, 11:15-16] as He *gave* to us when we *believed* in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” (11:17). His questioners immediately agreed with him, giving glory to God and declaring, “Then to the Gentiles also God has *granted repentance*”—not a work—“that leads to life” (11:18). The emphasis on God’s “gift” (3x), a “message,” “belief,” and “repentance” demonstrates that Peter clearly understood God’s salvation to not only be extended to the Gentiles, but also to be received by grace alone through faith alone.⁴ Furthermore, just as Paul could cite a divine source for his gospel, so could Peter—God had clearly revealed to both men that salvation was by grace alone through faith alone.

So, when Peter visited Paul in Antioch, he, like Paul, participated with the Gentiles fully in all social activities (e.g., “eating,” v. 12—probably including the “love feast” of 1 Corinthians 11:20-21), even as he had done with Cornelius. While this was forbidden for a Jew to do under the ceremonial Law of Moses, these cultural restrictions were done away in Christ (cf. Ephesians 2:11ff), and Paul and Peter together enjoyed the new unity as Jews and Gentiles became one body in the church. However, when “certain men came from James” (i.e., Judaizers, here called “the circumcision party,” claiming James’ authority [cf. Acts 15:24],⁵ as they had Peter’s), Peter “drew back and separated himself” from the Gentiles.⁶

Peter’s sin is named by Paul in verse 13, and it is “hypocrisy” (lit. “play-acting”)—that is, believing truth, but not behaving outwardly in harmony with it; professing truth, but not practicing it. In this case, Peter professed the true gospel of grace alone, but he selectively practiced it. With the Gentile Christians, he behaved in accordance with the equality of grace alone, but when those who opposed such belief came, he behaved the opposite, effectively repudiating what he said he believed. He professed to elevate grace over works, but then he practiced a standard of works when that was more preferable or popular. Peter “stood condemned” because he acted “hypocritically” with reference to “the truth of the gospel.”



Application: What are some key areas of Christian doctrine and practice in which Christians today struggle with hypocrisy to the defaming of the gospel? What areas are your particular struggle with hypocrisy?

2. ***The motive (v. 12b)***

Peter’s motive is disclosed in verse 21—he was “fearing the circumcision party.” Peter was being driven by the fear of man, which “lays a snare” (Proverbs 29:25), and it had certainly ensnared Peter. MacArthur notes, “The old Peter—weak, fearful, and vacillating [and, we could add, impulsive]—had come to the fore again.”⁷ These Jerusalem delegates were apparently shocked when they saw Peter, the early apostolic leader (cf. Acts 2) and missionary to the Jews, eating with Gentiles, and their mere presence, their verbal jabs, their expressions of dismay, their judgmental looks, and their threat of maligning him and undercutting his prestige and popularity in Jerusalem were enough to intimidate Peter and cause him to abandon his spiritual liberty. It was the “fear of man” that robbed him of his freedom.

Stott comments, “Peter did in Antioch precisely what Paul had refused to do in Jerusalem, namely yield to pressure. The same Peter who had denied his Lord for fear of a maidservant now denied Him again for fear of the circumcision party. He still believed the gospel, but he failed to practice [sic] it. His conduct ‘did not square’ with it (NEB). He virtually contradicted it by his action, because he lacked the courage of his convictions.”⁸




Application: In today’s Christianity, what convictions are especially prone to falter because of the “fear of man”? How does the “fear of man” implant itself in our minds, hearts, and then actions?

3. ***The result (vv. 13-14a)***

a. ***Other believers were led astray into sin (v. 13).***


Verse 13 says, “The rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.” All the Jewish Christians in Antioch, even Paul’s close ministry partner Barnabas,⁹ were “led astray” from

practicing the truth of the gospel that they professed. Peter seems to have learned from this unfortunate consequence of his sin, for he wrote at the end of his ministry in 2 Peter 3:17, “Therefore, dear friends, since you have been forewarned, be on your guard that you do not get led astray by the error of these unprincipled men and fall from your firm grasp on the truth.”

 **Application:** When have you witnessed the hypocrisy of one person causing other people to engage in sinful practices?

b. The gospel was undermined (v. 14a).

Paul describes Peter’s behavior this way: “[his] conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel.” We have all heard the pithy saying, “Your talk talks and your walk talks, but your walk talks louder than your talk talks.” Such was the case with Peter’s sin. While he would have passed his ordination as a professor and protector of sound biblical doctrine, his practice compromised that completely, and the true gospel of grace was replaced with a gospel of works. One commentator has rightly observed, “If Paul had not taken his stand against Peter that day, either the whole Christian church would have drifted into a Jewish backwater and stagnated, or there would have been a permanent rift between Gentile and Jewish Christendom, ‘one Lord, but two Lord’s tables’. Paul’s outstanding courage on that occasion in resisting Peter preserved both the truth of the gospel and the international brotherhood of the church.”¹⁰

 **Application:** In what ways have you witnessed the inconsistency of believers affecting how observant unbelievers think about Christianity (i.e., their attitude toward Jesus, their response to the Bible’s teachings and ethic, etc.)?

Transition: Peter’s sin was hypocrisy, as he professed one understanding of the gospel but practiced another; his motive was the fear of man; and the result of his snare was that other believers were led astray into sin and the truth of the gospel was undermined.¹¹ The stage has been set, and now a guardian of the gospel enters and issues his rebuke.

Illustration: Throughout much of the nineteenth century, Wendell Phillips, a lawyer, politician, and philanthropist in Boston, MA, championed the cause of abolition. So influential was he that his legacy continues to live on in buildings, neighborhoods, and awards that bear his name. In 1915, a monument was erected in the Boston Public Garden to honor Phillips, inscribed with his words: “Whether in chains or in laurels, liberty knows nothing but victories.” While such a sentiment sounds glorious and guaranteed, Phillips himself knew better. During an anti-slavery meeting in 1852, he declared, “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty!”¹²

“Eternal vigilance”—what a good label for the spirit that Paul displayed throughout his entire ministry (read Acts 20:17-35). He delighted in, declared, and defended real freedom in Christ (cf. Galatians 2:4; 5:1, 13), and he did so until his dying breath. In our passage, Paul’s legacy as a guardian of the gospel is only beginning to be built, but even at this early point in Paul’s ministry, his protective posture is instructive for us.


1. The motive (v. 14a)

Paul’s motive is diametrically opposed to Peter’s. Whereas Peter feared man, which caused him to distort the gospel, Paul feared God, which caused him to defend the gospel. Paul had, after all, been “entrusted” by God with this gospel message (v. 7; cf. 1:6-12), so “when [he] saw that [Peter’s] conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel,” he issued his rebuke. Paul recognized that God’s calling upon him as a gospel minister was not merely to proclaim the gospel, but also to protect it. So in his love for and obedience to God, he confronted the “influential” Peter.

As we saw in our previous lesson, Paul understood that the message was more important than any man. No one’s reputation is above the gospel! Peter was “influential” and a “pillar,” and Paul had only recently sought him out for spiritual accountability and partnership (vv. 1-10). Nonetheless, because there is equality in ministry partnerships (vv. 6-10), Paul rebukes Peter. When it comes to guarding the gospel, age, experience, friendship, and expertise don’t matter (on the part of one deviating or the one defending)—only faithfulness to God’s Word is important (cf. 1 Timothy 5:19-20)!

Application: Long-term partners in ministry and faithful models of ministry—such people ought to be respected, but they are not beyond the need to be corrected when they stray from the truth of the gospel.

A final explanatory note—notice what Paul’s motive in this confrontation is *not*. His burden to protect grace is *not* because he had his rights and wanted to selfishly enjoy his liberty (like some within evangelicalism today—**Illustration:** Perry Noble, who introduced his Esther program with *Highway to Hell* and defended himself to his friend by basically saying, “I have my rights and no one can tell me otherwise; I get a kick out of seeing other Christians squirm when I enjoy my rights”¹³). No, while grace does indeed provide us with certain rights of spiritual freedom, Paul would be the first to acknowledge that gospel grace demands careful discernment, distinct living, and conservative conduct (cf. Romans 6:1ff; Titus 2:1-14). Paul would sometimes defend the privileges offered to us in the gospel (to protect the gospel from legalism), and at other times he would sacrifice those rights that were his in Christ (to protect the gospel from libertinism; cf. Romans 14). Whether he was enjoying his freedom or limiting his liberty, he always did so in order to guard grace.

 **Application:** Is it easier for you to defend the grace of the gospel’s message or the godliness of the gospel’s expectation? Are you more prone to independently enjoy your Christian rights without much thought as to the implications or to selflessly sacrifice your liberty when the gospel’s protection or proclamation would be aided by it? Be aware of your propensity, and recognize that guardians of the gospel must do both.

Give some examples of when defending the gospel’s freedom would be necessary to protect its integrity (against legalism). Give some examples of when personally limiting one’s gospel liberty would be helpful in protecting its integrity (against libertinism) and expanding its impact.

2. **The point (v. 14c)**

Paul unmasks Peter’s hypocrisy with a simple pointed question: “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’s thinking is good and his logic is clear. His question has three main thoughts: (1) You are a Jew, but (2) you’ve been fine so far living like a grace-given Gentile and no longer like a traditional works-oriented Jew; so, (3) what gives you the right to compel the Gentiles to start living like traditional Jews?

Peter had failed to grow into “the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God,” but was instead still childlike, “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Ephesians 4:13-14). And that is why Paul “speaks the truth” to him “in love” (Ephesians 4:15).

Application: While we cannot make a point-by-point application of Paul’s criticism to our context today, for we are mostly Gentile, we can discover two relevant principles for us to consider in our own lives.

- Specific principle: How can you call people to works when you’ve been living by grace?
- General principle: How can you ask people to be like you when you’ve been like them?



Provide some specific examples of how we might be guilty of each one?

3. **The manner (v. 11, 14b)**

a. **A personal rebuke (v. 11)**

Paul “opposed [Peter] to his face.” In contrast to common confrontational practices, Paul didn’t gossip about Peter, write him an open letter, publish a blog diatribe, or attack his character. Paul went to Peter directly so that he could issue a personal, intimate, face-to-face rebuke. Such a direct, personal confrontation ensures that one is not misinterpreted and that his tone is not misunderstood. While confrontation may have to be public (as we will see next), we should always strive to make it personal (as in direct and relational, not derogatory and rude). By issuing an impersonal rebuke via a blog entry, Facebook post, anonymous letter, foyer gossip, etc. we are losing sight of our goal—to restore the erring brother or sister. An indirect

approach comes across like an ambush attack, and because it suggests cowardice, arrogance, and lovelessness, it is often rejected out of hand and usually serves only to harden a person's conscience and make him more stubborn in his sinful resolve. Making a direct and personal appeal is the best practice for cultivating conviction and restoring relationships.

b. A public rebuke (v. 14a)

Paul rebuked Peter "before them all." This was a public rebuke to match the public nature and influence of the sin. While Matthew 18 calls for a private confrontation for personal offenses, 1 Timothy 5:19-20 commands a public rebuke when the sin and sinner are public. Augustine said, "It is not advantageous to correct in secret an error which occurred publicly."¹⁴ When the church fails to openly confront a public error like Peter's, it suggests that it does not take sin seriously, that it does not deal with sin appropriately, and that it might even tacitly approve of sin. "A church that does not discipline sinning members (including the most prominent members) loses its credibility, because it does not take seriously its own doctrines and standards."¹⁵

c. A prompt rebuke (v. 14)

"When" Paul saw Peter's gospel-hindering conduct, he immediately rebuked Peter. He didn't wait to see if the situation would correct itself, if the error was a one-time occurrence, if the problem would just die on its own. Understanding what was at stake (i.e., "the truth of the gospel"), he accepted his responsibility to swiftly confront error before it took such a foothold that it could not be dislodged. All believers are given such a responsibility on a daily basis with one another. Hebrews 3:13 says, "Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."



Application: What stands out to you about the manner of Paul's rebuke of Peter? What aspect of Paul's manner is the least followed today, and why? What aspect do you most need to follow?

Fortunately, we know that Peter responded well to Paul's rebuke, as did the rest of the church at Antioch. And because of their humble confession and correction, they continued to be a tremendous headquarters for gospel ministry (cf. Acts 13-14, 16ff), a home church that Paul felt entirely comfortable basing his ministry out of.

Transition: In the second half of our passage, Paul explains the theology underlying his rebuke of Peter's hypocrisy. While we aren't sure whether or not he actually said this to Peter, he certainly included it here in his letter to demonstrate the doctrinal basis for his reprimand. This explanation also serves to transition into the meat of Paul's doctrinal defense of justification through faith alone in chapters 3-4.

PAUL'S EXPLANATION (vv. 15-21)

In verses 15-21, Paul introduces us to the primary theological concept that he is concerned with protecting in this epistle.¹⁶ That concept is called "justification," and Paul uses the verb and noun forms of this word five times in verses 16-17.

Of this doctrine Martin Luther [who recovered this lost doctrine, primarily by studying this epistle, thus commencing the Reformation] writes: "This is the truth of the gospel. It is also the principal article of all Christian doctrine, wherein the knowledge of all godliness consisteth. Most necessary it is, therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it unto others, and beat it into their heads continually." In other places he refers to it as the "chief", the "chiefest" and "the most principal and special article of Christian doctrine", for it is this doctrine "which maketh true Christians indeed". He adds: "if the article of justification be once lost, then is all true Christian doctrine lost."¹⁷

Justification is God's gracious answer to Job's question in Job 9:2, "How can a man be in the right before God?" (cf. Job 25:4). "Justification is the act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous [i.e., not guilty]" in Jesus Christ [i.e., because of His righteous life and sacrificial death]."¹⁸

"Justification" is a legal term, borrowed from the law courts. It is the exact opposite of "condemnation". "To condemn" is to declare somebody guilty; "to justify" is to declare him not guilty, innocent or

*righteous. In the Bible it refers to God's act of unmerited favour by which He puts a sinner right with Himself, not only pardoning or acquitting him, but accepting him and treating him as righteous.*¹⁹

It was this beautiful truth that Peter was undermining with his hypocritical and legalistic practice. So, having already issued the rebuke, Paul now explains it while also educating the church on the nature of justification. Paul's explanation can be outlined under four headings.

1. Thesis (vv. 15-16) – Justification is through faith alone, not through obedience to the Law.

Of these two verses, one author comments, "After working through the rest of the Epistle, one turns back to [these verses] and finds in [them] the whole truth in embryo."²⁰ We can summarize these two verses quite simply: regardless of one's background (v. 15)—that is, of Jewish origin benefiting from the revelation of divine Law or of Gentile birth, "alienated from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12)—justification is only through faith and not through obedience to the Law (v. 16).²¹

The phrase "we ourselves are Jews by birth...yet" is simply a logical admission: if Jews, like Paul and Peter, who had been seeking justification through adherence to the Mosaic Law, instead discovered themselves justified through faith in Jesus Christ (as they had), then it was proof of the inability of the Law to justify.²² Put another way: if Jewish Christians found themselves declared righteous as a result of believing in Jesus and not by keeping the Law, then they must acknowledge the insufficiency of the Law to justify. This simple logic highlights why Peter's hypocrisy was so alarming—in forcing the Gentiles to be like the Jews (v. 14), he was denying what he had learned to be so obviously true from his own spiritual experience.

In verse 16, Paul apparently uses a unique literary device, called *inclusio*,²³ that employs parallelism and repetition to unequivocally make his point. This device can be demonstrated by formatting the verse as follows:

We know that...

- a a person is not justified by works of the law
 - b but [he is justified] through faith in Jesus Christ
 - c so we also have believed in Christ Jesus
 - b¹ in order to be justified by faith in Christ
- a¹ and not [be justified] by works of the law

The verse then ends with a final phrase—"by works of the law no one [lit. no flesh] will be justified"—that references Old Testament Scripture in order to further affirm his dogmatic thesis (Psalm 143:2b²⁴; cf. Romans 3:20; also Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38).²⁵

One final note should be made regarding what Paul means by "the works of the Law." One commentator helpfully explains:

The "works of the law," then, refer to the commandments given by God in the Mosaic legislation in both its ceremonial and moral aspects, precepts commanded by God and thus holy and good in themselves [cf. Romans 7:12-14]. Because of the fallenness of human beings, however, "no flesh" could ever be justified by observing the law. Moreover, God himself knew and intended for it to be thus from the beginning. But why would God give a law no one could keep or issue commands no one could obey? Paul would struggle with this question in Gal 3 and 4 as he described the divine purpose for the law in the history of salvation,²⁶ "namely, to lead us to Christ, who is the 'end [telos] of the law' (Rom 10:4)."²⁷

After issuing his unshakeable and unmistakable thesis, Paul offers two supporting arguments.

2. Argument 1 (vv. 17-18) – A legalistic gospel makes Christ a promoter of sin.

There is no doubt that whether or not spoken to Peter, Paul's words in this paragraph were directed at Peter. Interestingly, though, Paul uses the first person personal pronoun to make his point. This feature is perhaps meant to lessen the blow or to demonstrate his own susceptibility to the legalists' pressure. In spite of this unique personalization and the broken, emotionally charged writing of this passage, Paul's arguments are clear.

Paul (and Peter and Barnabas and the other Jewish believers, although they had temporarily slipped into hypocrisy) was seeking to be “justified in Christ” through faith. If the Judaizers were right in their insistence on obedience to the Law for justification, then Paul and the rest had actually become “sinners” (i.e., no better than “those godless Gentile dogs,” as a Jew of that day might have said) by violating the Mosaic tradition concerning eating and fellowshiping with Gentiles. Worse yet, Christ, in advocating such a break from the Law in favor of grace and faith, had become a “servant [or, minister] of sin.” Thus, if the Judaizers are right, Christ is no better than a sin-promoting deceiver. This is what Peter was implicitly teaching through his inconsistent actions. In light of this airtight logic, Peter would have agreed with Paul’s vehement objection, “Certainly not” (lit. “may it never be!”).²⁸

In verse 18, Paul now shows the contrary reality—by withdrawing from the Gentiles, Peter had rebuilt what he had previously destroyed (i.e., a legalistic gospel), and such abandonment of the gospel of grace through faith “proved himself” to be the “transgressor,” not Christ. “Paul is arguing from Peter’s own experience of the grace of God. To go back to Moses is to deny everything that God had done for him and through him.”²⁹

3. *Argument 2 (vv. 19-20) – Union with Christ through faith satisfies the Law’s demands and penalties.*

Paul’s assertion in verse 19 and explanation in verse 20 demonstrate that he is now arguing for justification through faith alone on the basis of what that doctrine itself teaches, namely, the believer’s union and identification with Christ. The phrases “with Christ” and “Christ...in me” (v. 20) refer to this doctrine, which serves as the other side of the coin of justification. Sinners can be declared righteous (i.e., justified) only if they are objectively just. For that status to be theirs, an “alien righteousness” (Martin Luther) is needed (cf. Romans 3:21ff) and the penalty of their actual wrongdoing must be paid. In His life and death, Christ both earned full righteousness (Matthew 3:15; Hebrews 2:10; 4:15; 5:8) and paid the full penalty of the Law (Galatians 3:13; 4:4; Romans 3:24-26). These rich benefits are then credited to the sinner upon His faith in Jesus Christ as he is united to or baptized into Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 6:1-6; 1 Corinthians 12:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21). This is the essence of the true gospel, and Paul uses the substance of this doctrine to argue for its sufficiency.

Paul first states that “through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God” (v. 19). While the explanation of verse 20 will help us understand this seeming paradox, what is at least clear at this point is that that Law’s purpose was not to give life but to take it. Verse 20 helps us understand the paradox by showing how our relationship to the Law is taken care of in our relationship with Christ.³⁰ We can summarize it this way, “The Law demanded death for those who broke it, but Christ paid that death penalty for all sinners. Thus the Law killed Him and those joined to Him by faith, freeing them to be joined to another, to ‘live for God’ (cf. Rom. 7:4).”³¹

On the one hand, because “I have been [perfect verb: ‘was and still am’] crucified with Christ” (v. 20), “I died to the Law” (v. 19). Since Christ perfectly obeyed the Law and satisfied its demands and penalties, the benefits of His death are credited to the believer (Galatians 3:13; Romans 6:1-4). Thus, if I am “in Him” by grace through faith (cf. Galatians 3:27), “I have died to the Law”—I am no longer in bondage to the fulfilling or breaking of it.

On the other hand, now “I might live to God” (v. 19; cf. Romans 7:4), because “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (v. 20). Paul shows how our justification relates to and provides the foundation for our sanctification. “The true Christian life is not so much a believer’s living for Christ as Christ’s living through the believer.”³² When we were joined to Christ in faith, He became our Master; enthroned in our heart, He began to cultivate His life within us. The way this happens is as “we live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” This phrase teaches us both the manner and motivation of the Christian life—the manner is in continued faith, and the motivation is the gospel truth that Jesus the Son of God (the focus of my faith) loves me and sacrificed His own self for me. Such a grace-empowered, faith-filled life is absolutely foundational for Spirit-filled living, as we will see in chapters 5-6.³³

Before we leave this argument, let us highlight a few implications of our union with Christ as it relates to our sanctification:

- ***Notice the importance of the work of Christ in our sanctification, just as in our justification.*** Not only have we been “crucified with Christ,” but now “Christ...lives in” us. Therefore, sanctification is not about “trying to do better” or “trying to beat our sin”; our Christian life is not mere self-

empowered moralism, the sanctification equivalent to legalistic justification. Instead, it involves gratefully yielding to and cooperating with Christ, so that we mirror, shadow, or give expression to His life working within us (cf. Philippians 2:12-13). Whatever godliness we discover being cultivated within us, we can be absolutely sure that it is not us—instead, it is the fruit of Christ living within us.

- **Notice the importance of faith on our part in sanctification, just as in justification.** “The life [we] now live in the flesh, [we] live by faith in the Son of God.” In his Christian life, a healthy believer continues to relate to God on the basis of faith in Christ. While obedience is one of the most obvious expressions of such faith (i.e., “the fruit of the Spirit” in chapter 5), it is just that—an expression of his relationship with God and not the basis of it. The Christian no longer relates to God on the basis of his own accomplished obedience, but on Jesus’ alone. Therefore, what this means practically is that Christian living should be “intensely personal.” One writer crystallizes this point:

*As in the old days the law had filled [Paul’s] horizon and dominated his thought-life, so now it is Christ. Christ is the sole meaning of life for him (Phil. 1:21): every moment is passed in conscious dependence on Christ, to whom he looks for everything. This is Christian faith; and it is intensely personal.*³⁴

- **Notice the importance of the gospel as the motivation for our faith in sanctification, just as in justification.** Why was Paul so powerfully motivated to “live by faith” so that Christ’s life would be seen in his own? He never got over the thrilling reality that Jesus “loved me and gave Himself for me.” This was his regular meditation, his constant joy, his daily perspective, his unending hope! Therefore, we ought to confront our apathy, fear, and guilt with the powerful incentive of Christ’s lavish grace toward us.

4. **Conclusion (v. 21) – A legalistic gospel nullifies grace and wastes Christ’s crucifixion.**

Paul ends with a dogmatic assertion: if anyone was “nullify[ing] the grace of God,” it was not him! Instead, those who were rebuilding a legalistic gospel (v. 18) were rejecting the need for grace and

crucifying Christ in vain. The logic is simple: if “righteousness [is] through the law”—that is, if one can be justified by God simply through his obedience to the Law—“then Christ died for no purpose,” His crucifixion was a tragic and foolish waste, His dying statement that “it is finished” (John 19:30) was deceiving or at least dishonest, and grace is completely unnecessary (cf. Romans 4:4). But we know better, especially now that we have traced Paul’s arguments. Friends, let us take care to not be “deserting Him who called [us] in the grace of Christ...[by] turning to a different gospel” (Galatians 1:6). Instead, let us live “to the praise of His glorious grace” (Ephesians 1:6).

After considering Paul’s explanation, eternity hangs in the balance:

*Paul’s logic is incontrovertible. Yet many still pursue the fallacious logic of the legalizers. They suppose that to earn their salvation is somehow praiseworthy and noble, when actually it is vainglorious and ignoble. True nobility (and humility) is to accept what God offers. One must either receive God’s offer of salvation or insult Him.*³⁵



Application: What part of Paul’s explanation is the most compelling to you? What part presented you with a new way of thinking about the true gospel? Where have you been failing to guard the gospel?

CONCLUSION

Paul stands alone in our passage and by his example teaches us that **we must guard the gospel from all that might subvert it**. That responsibility is no less relevant today than it was two thousand years ago.

*Paul’s struggle for Christian liberty and the truth of the gospel is far from being a dead issue....Human beings are forever trying to add something to God’s completed work of salvation. It may be Jesus Christ and the mass, or Jesus Christ and water baptism, or Jesus Christ and good works, or Jesus Christ and a charismatic experience. Paul’s argument is that nothing, absolutely nothing, can be mingled with Christ as a ground of our acceptance with God. Our hope is built on nothing less—and nothing more—than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.*³⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ See the *Pre-Lesson—The Background of Galatians* at singlefocusindy.org/galatians.

² Albeit, such swiftness in turning away from the true gospel on the part of the Galatian believers is exactly what surprises and concerns Paul in Galatians 1:6.

³ “So puzzling is this episode, and so embarrassing is it to extravagant views on the infallibility of the apostles that some early interpreters explained this ‘Cephas’ as being another person, one of the seventy perhaps [thus, disregarding the phrase ‘the other apostles’ in 1:19], or else as a maneuver [a kind of straw man argument] contrived among the apostles who both held the same view but used this device to condemn Judaizers by apparently discrediting Peter whom the Judaizers kept quoting” (Homer Kent, *The Freedom of God’s Sons* [Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1976], 67).

⁴ “It is only a small digression within the broad boundaries of our discussion to say that the Christian church cannot be what it is called to be when ritual, race, class, or other distinctions separate members from each other. The labels men put on themselves and on others are irrelevant to God, and should also be irrelevant to His people. Before salvation, every person is equally separated from God, and after salvation every person is equally reconciled to God. Believers ‘are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus ... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for [they] are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal. 3:26, 28). Because believers are all children of God, they are all brothers and sisters, with no exceptions or distinctions” (John F. MacArthur Jr., *Galatians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody Press, 1983], 50).

⁵ “Paul is not implying that James of necessity sent them (indeed, James denies this in Acts 15:24); but they were certainly men from James’ circle, James’ group, within the Jerusalem church.... They were clearly his own ‘right wing’, the Pharisaic group, and a sore embarrassment even to him” (R. Alan Cole, *Galatians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 9, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989], 117). “Obviously these visitors felt some attachment to James, respected his leadership of the church in Jerusalem, and perhaps even carried letters of recommendation from him (cf. 2 Cor 3:1–3).... It is likely then that the ‘men from James’ were zealot members of the ultra-right wing party within the Palestinian movement” (Timothy George, *Galatians*, vol. 30, *The New American Commentary* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994], 175–176).

⁶ “The imperfect tense may indicate that Peter’s withdrawal was gradual and, if so, suggests the idea of sneaky retreat. Acquiescing to both the ritualism and racism of the Jews, he began to drift away from his Gentile brethren and stopped accepting their invitations to dinner. He found excuses not to join with them in other activities and finally held himself aloof from them altogether” (MacArthur, 51). “In the Greek text the verbs ‘began to draw back’ and ‘separate himself’ are in the imperfect tense, indicating that Peter’s action may have happened gradually as, little by little, he reacted to the increasing pressures of the Jerusalem visitors until finally ‘he drew back and began to hold aloof’ (NEB)” (George, 176).

⁷ MacArthur, 51.

⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 52.

⁹ “The fact that “even Barnabas” could be pressured to yield over the issue of table fellowship indicates both the strong influence exerted by the legalistic Jewish Christians and the loneliness of Paul’s resistance to their demands” (George, 176–177).

¹⁰ Stott, 52.

¹¹ MacArthur summarizes five lessons that can be learned from Peter’s failure in this passage: “The first is that even uniquely gifted ministers of the gospel can commit serious transgressions, sometimes becoming guilty of the very errors and sins they once strongly preached against.... Second, we learn that faithfulness involves more than believing the right doctrine.

Right doctrine without right behavior always produces hypocrisy. Third, we learn that truth is more important than outward harmony and peace.... Fourth, we see that situation ethics is ungodly ethics.... Fifth, we learn that falsehood is not to be ignored, regardless of the consequences that opposition to it may bring” (MacArthur, 52–53).

¹² Warren Wiersbe, *Be Free* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004), p. 49 and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wendell_Phillips.

¹³ *Elephant Room*, Round 1, www.theelephantroom.com.

¹⁴ Quoted in MacArthur, 54.

¹⁵ MacArthur, 54.

¹⁶ In fact, as Galatians was likely Paul’s first epistle, this may very well be the first Pauline reference to justification by faith alone.

¹⁷ Stott, 59–60.

¹⁸ Wiersbe, 695. He continues,

Every word of this definition is important. Justification is an act and not a process. No Christian is “more justified” than another Christian. “Having therefore been once-and-for-all justified by faith, we have peace with God” (Rom. 5:1, literal translation). Since we are justified by faith, it is an instant and immediate transaction between the believing sinner and God. If we were justified by works, then it would have to be a gradual process.

Furthermore, justification is an act of God; it is not the result of man’s character or works. “It is God that justifieth” (Rom. 8:33). It is not by doing the “works of the Law” that the sinner gets a right standing before God, but by putting his faith in Jesus Christ. As Paul will explain later in this letter, the Law was given to reveal sin and not to redeem from sin (see Rom. 3:20). God in His grace has put our sins on Christ—and Christ’s righteousness has been put to our account (see 2 Cor. 5:21).

In justification, God declares the believing sinner righteous; He does not make him righteous. (Of course, real justification leads to a changed life, which is what James 2 is all about.) Before the sinner trusts Christ, he stands GUILTY before God; but the moment he trusts Christ, he is declared NOT GUILTY and he can never be called GUILTY again!

Justification is not simply “forgiveness,” because a person could be forgiven and then go out and sin and become guilty. Once you have been “justified by faith” you can never be held guilty before God.

Justification is also different from “pardon,” because a pardoned criminal still has a record. When the sinner is justified by faith, his past sins are remembered against him no more, and God no longer puts his sins on record (see Ps. 32:1–2; Rom. 4:1–8).

Finally, God justifies sinners, not “good people.” Paul declares that God justifies “the ungodly” (Rom. 4:5). The reason most sinners are not justified is because they will not admit they are sinners! And sinners are the only kind of people Jesus Christ can save (Matt. 9:9–13; Luke 18:9–14).”

¹⁹ Stott, 60.

²⁰ James Montgomery Boice, “Galatians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 448. Also, “It would be hard to find a more forceful statement of the doctrine of justification than this. It is insisted upon by the two leading apostles (‘we know’), confirmed from their own experience (‘we have believed’), and endorsed by the sacred Scriptures of the Old Testament (‘by works of the law shall no one be justified’). With this threefold guarantee we should accept the biblical doctrine of justification and not let our natural self-righteousness keep us from faith in Christ” (Stott, 64).

²¹ “Three times in Galatians 2:16 Paul declares that salvation is only through faith in Christ and not by law. The first statement is general: a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus. The second is personal: even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that

we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Law. The third is universal: by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified (cf. Ps. 143:2). All three affirm the same great reality” (MacArthur, 57).

²² “Forget the Gentile sinners. We know they are outside the covenant and hopeless before God. But even we Jews who could claim all the privileges of the chosen people, even we had to realize that no one could be justified by observing the law. We too, no less than the Gentiles, have been accepted by God through faith in Jesus Christ” (George, 189–190). “‘As Jews,’ he was indicating, ‘we of all people know what it is to live by the system of law. We know the law as a way of life, what it is to function continually under the demands of religious rituals and regulations. Yet even we were saved by believing in Christ Jesus, not by the law. And if we, as Jews, cannot be saved by the law, how can we expect sinners from among the Gentiles to be?’” (MacArthur, 55–56). “Jewish believers had all alike believed in Christ with a view to being saved. That in itself is a confession that the old system of Judaism was not enough. If keeping the law had been an effective way to win acceptance with God, then there would have been no need for Christ to have come.... All Jewish Christians, therefore, had initially agreed that it was utterly impossible to commend themselves to God by law-keeping. They had shown this by abandoning law-observance as a possible means of salvation, and turning instead to that salvation offered freely by the Messiah in response to faith” (R. Alan Cole, *Galatians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 9, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989], 121).

²³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inclusio>

²⁴ “Paul clinched his argument at the end of 2:16 by quoting a verse from Ps 143:2 (Ps 142:2 in the LXX): ‘Do not bring your servant into judgment,’ the psalmist had prayed, ‘for no one living will be justified before you.’ In Paul’s rendering of this verse, however, he changed the quotation to read ‘no flesh will be justified.’...”

What did Paul mean by the expression ‘no flesh shall be justified’ (italics added)? In Gal 5:17–21 Paul contrasted the works of the flesh... to the fruit of the Spirit. For Paul, flesh was that realm of human existence that was most vulnerable to the ravages of sin. Flesh was not evil in itself since it was created by a good God, but in its fallen state it was subject to the debilitating forces of desire, decay, and death. Thus in Gal 2:16 ‘Paul takes pain to change the wording of the Septuagint in order to say that humanity, because of its weakness and susceptibility to sin, cannot keep the law.’ In Rom 8:3 Paul would spell out more fully what he announced here in Gal 2:16, ‘For what the law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh’ (NASB). Paul’s point was that no one could find salvation by keeping the law simply because no one can keep the law.

F. Thielman has shown how the wider context of the psalm Paul quoted supports this thesis. Psalm 143 is a petition to God for deliverance from the enemy. The rescue envisioned there depends entirely on God’s faithfulness and righteousness. ‘For your name’s sake, O Lord, preserve my life; in your righteousness, bring me out of trouble’ (Ps 143:11). Thus rather than merely snatching a proof text to support his predetermined conclusion, Paul had in mind the motif of unilateral rescue and divine deliverance that pervades the entire Psalm” (George, 190–191).

²⁵ “What Paul came to realize in coming to faith in Christ was not so much God’s judgment against his wickedness, for that was a standard assumption of rabbinic Judaism, but rather God’s indictment of Paul’s goodness. For this reason he considered as garbage that which he formerly counted as the most precious cargo of life. That which was dearest and most precious to him, he came to realize, could not produce a right standing before God. In light of God’s justifying grace, all that had been ‘gain’ was now ‘loss.’ As Karl Barth summarized Paul’s autobiographical confession in Phil 3:7: ‘The heights on which I stood are abysmal. The assurance in which I lived is lostness; the light I had darkness. It is not that nil takes the place of the plus, but the plus itself changes to a minus’” (George, 190).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

²⁸ For an alternative interpretation—that is, that Paul is addressing the concerns of ‘antinomianism’ or ‘libertinism’ in verses 17–18, consider the following commentators:

“Paul’s opponents argued, however, that since justification by faith eliminated the Law, it encouraged sinful living. A person could believe in Christ for salvation and then do as he pleased, having no need to do good works. Paul hotly denied the charge, especially noting that this made Christ the promoter of sin” (Donald K. Campbell, “Galatians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985], 595).

“[Some] see here a direct reference to the charge made by the Judaizers that Paul preached ‘antinomianism’. To the Jew, Paul’s gospel of salvation by free grace through faith in Christ would remove all incentive for moral effort and all desire to avoid sin. In their eyes, such a doctrine would lead to a lower moral standard than under the law of Moses. Therefore, even Christ would have only become *hamartias diakonos*, an agent of sin, or ‘an abettor of sin’ (neb), one who ‘promotes sin’ (niv). Paul rightly recoils from such a blasphemy with horror. As often, his first reaction to this sort of charge is not theological argument, but a strong statement that this is utterly inconsistent with the revealed nature of God. There is no need for him to show in detail at this stage how utterly false such a charge would be. In the third and last section of the letter (‘The argument from results’, 5:2–6:18), Paul will develop this thought further” (Cole, 122–123).

“A final interpretation is that Paul refers to the standard antinomian objection to the doctrine of justification by faith which, significantly enough, he also deals with elsewhere. This view is adopted by Ridderbos, Stamm, and Stott... According to this interpretation, Paul would be answering the objection that to eliminate the law entirely as he is doing is to encourage godless living, living without norms. The argument would go, ‘Your doctrine of justification by faith is dangerous, for by eliminating the law you also eliminate a man’s sense of moral responsibility. If a person can be accounted right eous simply by believing that Christ died for him, why then should he bother to keep the law or, for that matter, why should he bother to live by any standard of morality? There is no need to be good. The result of your doctrine is that men will believe in Christ but thereafter do as they desire.’ Paul’s reply is abrupt. The form of his expression suggests that he was aware of the possibility that a Christian can (and that all Christians do) sin. But this is not the result of the doctrine of justification by faith, and therefore Christ is not responsible for it. Such a thought is abhorrent. ‘Absolutely not!’ ‘God forbid!’ If there is sin, as Paul acknowledges indirectly in the next verse, man himself is responsible (‘I am a lawbreaker’)” (Boice, 450).

²⁹ Wiersbe, 695.

³⁰ “Through the Law I died to the Law” is undoubtedly referring to the teaching of verse 20 that we have been connected with Christ in His death when He came under the curse of the Law (cf. 3:13; Romans 6:1–4). However, it also quite possibly looks forward to another similar theme in this epistle—that is, our discovery of Christ when the condemnation of the Law (i.e., “through the Law”) led us to Him and His rescue (i.e., “death to the Law”—cf. 3:19–25).

³¹ Campbell, 596.

³² MacArthur, 60.

³³ For example, appropriating our crucifixion with Christ is what cancels the ongoing power of the flesh (5:45; cf. Romans 6:6) and world (6:14).

³⁴ Cole, 126.

³⁵ Boice, 452.

³⁶ George, 153.