

# Conflict, reconciliation and the Gospel

## Galatians 2:11-14

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When we read in the Bible about Jesus' life, we see that He had an uncanny way of attracting even the most "sinful" of people to Himself. He was a "safe place" for those who were aware of their sin and brokenness. On the other hand, Jesus reserved His harshest words for the religious people who said one thing with their mouths, but did something different with their lives. They were religious hypocrites and Jesus would have nothing to do with them.

Don't judge the religious hypocrites of Jesus' day too harshly. Are we not at times guilty of the same? We claim to belong to Christ, but then our lives testify that our loyalties lie elsewhere. For some, hypocrisy is something that they are very aware of and are doing intentionally. For others, it may be a form of slavery that they wish to be freed from, but don't know how. In these verses we see hypocrisy in the midst of the life of a believer.

To best understand Galatians 2:11-14, it is helpful to first be aware of the background information. In Acts 10 God had revealed to Peter through a vision that he should not be prejudiced against Gentiles (non-Jews). The gospel of Jesus Christ was to be extended to all people. In response to what God had revealed to him, Peter said this in Acts 10:28, *"You know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with a foreigner or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean."*

In Acts 11, we find the story of the church of Antioch. When persecution broke out in Jerusalem many of the earliest Jewish followers of Christ fled. Some went to Syrian Antioch and began sharing the Gospel to non-Jews.

Acts 11:21-24 recounts the story in these words, *"And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord."<sup>22</sup> The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.<sup>23</sup> When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose,<sup>24</sup> for he*

*was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord."*

The church in Antioch and the man named Barnabas were used by God in a mighty way, as God sought to spread the gospel across ethnic lines from the Jews to the Gentiles.

Eventually the church in Antioch sent out Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey to start new churches. Paul and Barnabas started four churches in the Roman province of Galatia, which would now be part of modern day Turkey. These churches were made up of both Gentiles and Jews.

In each church, false teachers came in after Paul and Barnabas left and tried to disrupt the churches by saying that since Jesus was a Jewish Messiah, and since the prophecies came from Jewish prophets, that for a person to become a follower of Jesus Christ they must first become a Jew and obey all the Jewish laws.

These false teachers, known as "Judaizers," taught the heresy that salvation was earned based on who you are and what you have done, but that is not true. Salvation through Jesus Christ is based on who God is and what He has done.

We see in Acts 15, in the Jerusalem Council, that the leaders in the church in Jerusalem declared that the gospel that Paul proclaimed was truly the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The issue seemed to be settled, but then we hear about this story in Galatians 2:11-14:

*<sup>11</sup>But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. <sup>12</sup>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 <sup>13</sup>And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. <sup>14</sup>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?"*

Cephas was another name for Peter. Peter had been one of the closest followers of Jesus Christ while Jesus was on earth. On the day of Pentecost, Peter had preached and 3,000 people had been saved. He was respected by all of the early Christians. At this time Peter was now one of the chief leaders of the church in Jerusalem. During these earliest years after Jesus' return to heaven, this church in Jerusalem was the most respected church. Peter was one of the most respected leaders of the most respected church, but yet Paul saw it necessary to confront him, publicly.

Imagine what it must have been like for Paul. There sat the Jews of the church of Antioch. This was the church to whom the grace had been given to overcome prejudice and hate. There sat Barnabas, one of Paul's co-laborers and close friends. He had mentored Paul. They had faced death together for the sake of the gospel. There sat Peter, one of the pillars of the early church. Peter, by his actions, had led them all to turn their back on the Gentile believers, thus turning their back on the truths of the gospel. Now, as Paul watched their hypocrisy, he had a decision to make.

Paul chose to confront Peter. All those who overheard likely felt the rebuke as well. In verse 11 the ESV translation uses the phrase “opposed him to his face” to describe Paul’s form of confrontation. In the original language, this was a defensive phrase. It could be written, “withstood him to his face.” Peter’s actions brought the offense. Paul was merely defending the truth. He was not seeking out confrontation, but for the sake of the gospel he was willing to endure it. This one sentence presents much for us to consider.

First of all, “Paul opposed Peter.” Many times, for the love of peace, we choose not to oppose or confront. We hate conflict enough that we choose to not confront, when confrontation may be the most loving action that we can take. At times we claim to withhold confrontation because we want to be loving, when in reality the only person that we are loving is ourselves. We just don’t want to have to endure the pain, discomfort or risk of rejection. We don’t love the other person enough to confront them for their own good.

Notice how verse 11 also tells of Paul opposing Peter “to his face.” Paul had enough integrity to go to Peter and speak about the problem. Many times we do not have the courage to confront a person face-to-face. Instead we remain silent and judge them in our hearts, or speak behind the person’s back gossiping to others about the issue. That should not be.

Verse 11 then says this, “*I (Paul) opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.*” “He stood condemned” can be more clearly translated as, “His error was clear to all.” Paul did not confront him with only partial information. It was clear that Peter was in the wrong. We must follow Paul’s example at this point. At times we pass judgment on another when we only know part of the story. We have not taken time to draw near and find out the truth of the situation. We judge from afar, based on what we suppose has happened without knowing context, details or even the true motive. We are drawn into sin when we pass judgment without knowing the truth about a situation.

Paul opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. This is merely an example of Proverbs 27:5, “*Better is open rebuke than love that is concealed.*”

In verse 12 the story continues:

*<sup>12</sup> 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.*

Peter had been eating with the Gentiles before these certain Jews arrived. That fact was amazing in itself. From the Jewish perspective, the Gentiles made the food unclean because they did not wash their hands correctly. They ate unclean food. They prepared it in an unclean manner. They themselves were unclean by the mere fact of being Gentile.

For Peter to set aside all of these Jewish laws and eat and celebrate the Lord’s Supper with the Gentiles in their homes was communicating a very clear gospel. Their unity in Christ far outweighed their differences. And Peter did not eat with them only once. The phrase “he was eating” in verse 12 can be translated as a continuous action, “He was in the habit of eating” with the Gentiles.

Peter had come to Antioch and joined in these feasts with the Gentiles. But once Jews from James (from the church in Jerusalem) arrived, Peter withdrew from fellowshiping with the Gentiles because he “feared” the Judaizers. It does not say what he feared. He might have feared persecution, conflict, rejection, disapproval or not living up to expectations. We do not know for sure what he feared, but fear is something with which we are all familiar. Being fearful of others can take on many forms, but it brings to the surface the fear of God vs. the fear of man. It is a question of loyalty, love, security, belonging, devotion, faith and trust.

Verse 12 clearly tells us that Peter’s fear was related to the arrival of “certain men.” Do we have people like that in our lives? It may be that we are good at living a Christian life until “certain people” come around. Then, because of our fear of them, we slip into a life of hypocrisy until they leave. We must beware of their influence upon us. We must confess our hypocrisy and ask God to change our hearts and free us from the effect they have on our lives.

The question of Antioch was not merely “Can a Gentile become a Christian?” but also “Must we share our lives with them if they do?” It is one thing to call one a brother from a distance, but it is another to have your children play together, to pray together, to spend time at each other’s homes, to be seen in public together and to bear each other’s burdens in the midst of need or even tragedy. Peter was caught trying to please his fellow Jews at the expense of ostracizing the Gentiles. Because of this, the confidence in the gospel was suffering.

*<sup>13</sup> And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.*

Verse 13 tells us that the other Jews followed Peter’s example and withdrew from the Gentiles as well. So much so, that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. The word “hypocrisy” comes from a word that described an actor who spoke from behind a mask and hid his true identity. His true identity and his public identity were not the same. This was Peter’s problem. He was a follower of Jesus Christ, but he was not living like it. Peter knew the truth about God’s view of the Gentiles, but then he acted against what he knew to be true. Does that ever happen to you? Like this story reveals, we must understand that our hypocrisy does not just affect us. It affects those with whom we have influence. It has the power to be a stumbling block even to others in the faith. We must also be careful who we put our trust in. It is okay to listen to biblical preachers, read Christian books or receive counsel from those who are mature in their faith, but only Christ is perfect and infallible. All people are susceptible to temptation. We are in the process of being made like Christ. Because of this, we each will be tainted by hypocrisy in our lives until the day that we enter heaven and all sin is put aside. In light of this put your full trust in Christ alone.

*<sup>14</sup> 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?”*

“Their conduct was not in step with the gospel.” “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), yet these Jews acted as if they were somehow better than their fellow believers who were Gentiles. “By grace they all had been saved through faith. And this was not their own

*doing; it was the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one could boast.*" Yet they acted as if they were more entitled to the blessings of God. They were not living in step with the truth of the gospel. The bad news of the gospel tells us of our sin and humbles the proud. The good news of the gospel tells us of God's grace and lifts up the lowly. Because of this, in Christ we are all equal in both our guilt and his grace.

The fear and insecurity that Peter displayed is not in step with the gospel either. In Christ all of our needs are met (Philippians 4:19). We no longer have to fear the approval or opinion of man. We can now serve others instead of being enslaved by them. As our lives are built upon the rock of God's Word, we no longer have to fear. Like a child with their father, once they are by his side they know that he will meet their every need.

Another sign of being out of step with the truth of the gospel is when one returns to the sinful patterns of the old life. Peter's faith had faltered in the past. In Matthew 14:30 Peter walked on water, until his faith gave in to fear and he began to sink. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter chose fear instead of faith and drew his sword to protect Jesus in his own power. In Matthew 16:22-23 Peter once again gave in to fear and told Jesus not to go to the cross. In Luke 22:54-62 Peter denied Christ 3 times when fear of others overcame his faith in Christ. And now, even though the Holy Spirit was in him, he returned to the old pattern of fear instead of faith.

When we distance ourselves from God, either through sin or neglect, we put ourselves in a vulnerable place in life. It is in these moments that our spirit is weakened, our desires start to wane and by default we return to our godless ways of living from the past. As we walk closely to Christ on a daily basis, the opposite occurs. Our spirits are strengthened, our desires are holy and we are empowered to walk in the ways of Christ. It is then that we walk in the gospel, *"putting off the former way of life, our old selves, which are being corrupted by deceitful desires"* (Ephesians 4:22).

Prejudice also reveals that we are not in step with the gospel. Prejudice is based on pride and fear, both of which should not characterize a follower of Christ. Prejudice puts the value on who we are and what we have done. The gospel grants us salvation because of who God is and what He has done.

The gospel proclaims the wickedness of our hearts and that our best deeds are worth no more than "filthy rags." The gospel puts everyone on level ground. Sin strips us all bare and unearned grace gives us standing with God that we can take no credit for on our own. We are all equal at the foot of the cross. Regardless of race, education, finances, or gender, we are all sinners in need of grace. The gospel humbles the proud and gives hope to the lowly. For one who is walking in the truths of the gospel there is no room or reason for prejudice.

As we look back at these verses as a whole, Paul was faced with a choice. Confront a beloved church-leader and risk conflict and disagreement, or remain silent and let the Gospel be perverted and defamed. He too faced a question of the fear of man vs. the fear of God. It was a question of love. Would he love himself and avoid conflict or would he love Christ, Peter and the others, and speak the truth in love. He chose to speak, and his choice is still affecting people today.

We must do the same. In the power of the Holy Spirit and in keeping with the gospel, we must choose the path of love and reconciliation.

The first step to reconciliation with others is to be reconciled to God. In this act one is forgiven, his needs are met and God grants a heart of reconciliation. It is on the foundation of Jesus Christ that one can build a life free of insecurity, past sin patterns and prejudice. Have you ever repented and believed in Jesus Christ?

To walk in step with Christ in the midst of a multi-cultural church pray for removal of your pride, prejudice and bitterness. These are three of the sins that keep us from reconciliation with others. Ask God to work a change in your heart at the deepest level and rid you of these sins.

Most prejudice is rooted in ignorance and fear. To fight against ignorance, intentionally build cross cultural friendships. Strangers will no longer be foreigners from another country. They now will be friends with a name and a story. As you get to know them and share life with them, the ignorance and fear that drove your prejudice will begin to disappear.

To enter into spiritual fellowship with other believers from different cultures or backgrounds, we must cling to our eternal common ground. We come from different countries. We have different colors of skin. We have different first languages. We have different jobs and live at different economic levels. We have different perspectives of the world. We have so many differences, but none of that can compare with what we have in common. We are all sinners saved by grace. We are all children of the King of kings and Lord of lords. We were chosen together before God laid the foundations of the earth. We are loved unconditionally. We are precious. We are his treasure. We are called by His name and are destined to spend eternity together in His presence. We are family. Our physical bodies will pass away as we slip into eternity, and the color of our skin, our country of origin and the language that we speak will never again matter. We will finally be with Him and with each other forever.

Eternal life started the moment that we believed in Jesus Christ. In that moment we inherited brothers and sisters from every nation, tribe and tongue. As we humble ourselves before God and are reconciled to our "brothers," may the world see that the grace of God is among us.