

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – June 12, 2016**  
**Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church**

*Pastor Charles Heup*

**Galatians 2:11-21 (NIV)**

**When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12) For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. 13) The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. 14) When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? 15) "We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles 16) know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified. 17) "But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! 18) If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker. 19) "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 20) I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21) **I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"****

In the name of the Lord, dear friends:

I suspect we've all felt the pressure – at one time or another. We're doing something that comes quite naturally to us and then out of the corner of our eye we see a friend, a co-worker, a neighbor. We begin to wonder what they will think. Slowly but surely, we walk away from what we were doing. We've caved in to "peer pressure." We allowed someone else's opinion to influence our actions. Or maybe it happened this way. We have a strong opinion about something but when we are confronted by others who share a far different opinion we remain silent because we are afraid of the consequences. We didn't stand firm. We caved into peer pressure.

We're not alone! In the account from our text, the Apostle Paul is talking about a time when Peter – the bold, sometimes outspoken disciple of the Lord fell victim to peer pressure. As is often the case in situations like this Peter's refusal to take a stand for the truth had a negative impact on others. The Gospel and the freedom it offers was being compromised. That's why Paul opposed Peter to his face.

Unfortunately, the Gospel was once again being attacked in Galatia. Paul wrote the words of our text to encourage the Galatians and us to

**Theme:** Stand Firm in the Freedom of the Gospel

1. Be on guard against faithless fear
2. Be strengthened by God's grace

A little bit of background will help us to better understand the situation Paul described in our text and his reasons for sharing it with the churches in the region of Galatia. The churches in Galatia had come under the scrutiny of individuals who claimed to be Christians but who insisted that it was still necessary for believers – both Jew and Gentile – to follow certain Old Testament ceremonial laws in regard to diet and circumcision. Essentially, they were claiming that salvation depended upon a combination of works and faith. This error had been successfully refuted in Jerusalem when Paul took a strong stand against it. On that occasion, Peter stood firm with Paul. Similar claims were being circulated in Galatia. Those who were promoting this false teaching had attacked Paul – accusing him of not having the same standing as the Apostles in Jerusalem.

Paul responded to those accusations by defending the message he proclaimed. He proclaimed a message which had been given to him by Christ – the same message the apostles had received from Christ. Because the message was the same, both the Apostles and the churches in Judea praised God for the blessing of Paul’s ministry among the Gentiles. Galatians 2:9 provides this summary: **James, Cephas (better known to us as Peter) and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles (the uncircumcised), and they to the circumcised (a term used to describe the Jews).**

Furthermore, as Paul points out in our text for today, Peter even accepted his admonition when he caved into the pressure he felt when some of people from Jerusalem showed up in Antioch where Peter had been freely associating with the Gentile believers in that city. Antioch (located several 100 miles north of Jerusalem) could be described as the “mother church” of the Gentiles; just as Jerusalem could be described as the “mother church” of the Jewish Christians.

The believers in Antioch fully enjoyed the freedom they had in Christ. They realized that human works and efforts could not contribute anything to their salvation. This led them to very tolerant of the customs and traditions of others. So if a Jewish Christian wanted to eat kosher food at their fellowship meals – that was fine. But if they wanted to enjoy a “pork chop” or “ham sandwich” with their Gentile friends – that was fine too. When Peter came for a visit, he also enjoyed this freedom and often ate with the Gentiles. All of that changed when certain men from Jerusalem – the congregation where James was regarded as the leader arrived on the scene. It seems that Peter was afraid of what might happen if word of his actions got back to that troublesome element back in Jerusalem.

So Peter did an “about face.” He began to “act Jewish.” Others saw his example and followed his lead including Barnabas, who was Paul’s companion in his mission to the Gentiles. These men knew better but they caved into pressure. Paul saw these actions as acts of hypocrisy that compromised the truth of the Gospel and spoke out against their hypocrisy as he explains in our text. **When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?**

Paul understood the dangers of not following the truth of the Gospel. He understood that Peter’s actions made it appear as if salvation wasn’t by grace alone but required certain works on the part of the believer. Because Peter’s actions were public knowledge and had a negative effect on many, Paul openly confronted Peter pointing out the mixed message his actions were sending. So he reminded Peter to stand firm in the freedom of the Gospel and to be on guard against faithless fear.

This is a reminder we need to take to heart as well. Sadly, like Peter, we do not always act in line with the truth of the Gospel. Today the truth of the Gospel that faith Jesus is the only way to eternal life is attacked on all sides. If talk like that someone will be sure to condemn us as being intolerant and insensitive to others. So we’re careful in what we say when we’re in the presence of others. We’re not always willing to take a stand for the truths of the Gospel and to freely express the freedoms we enjoy because of Christ. We give the impression that we agree with those who suggest that sincerity of belief is what is most important. Sadly there are many who sincerely believe that they need to do something to earn salvation and with that belief they set aside Christ. When we allow faithless fear to drive us to silence we’re not only guilty of hypocrisy (believing one thing and doing something else). We’re also guilty giving the impression that it doesn’t matter what a person believes and in doing that we become guilty of encouraging the unbeliever to remain in their sins.

Standing firm in our Gospel freedom requires vigilance – stand guard against faithless fear with the confidence the Lord of truth is on your side and that he will keep you from all harm. In order to empower us to

stand firm in our Gospel freedom Paul points us to God's grace and encourages us to be strengthened by that grace. Paul is speaking of this grace in our text when he wrote:

**"We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles 16) know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.**

In some ways, the Jewish people had an advantage over the Gentiles whom they often regarded as being outsiders or "sinful." God had called the decedents of Abraham to be a people set apart from the nations. He provided Laws and decrees for his people and promised that the Savior of the world would come from this group of people. Many of the Laws the Lord gave his people were reminders of the Lord's grace in selecting them and were shadows of the sacrifice the Savior of the world would offer for the sins of all. Other Laws pointed out their sin and a need for a Savior and provided believers with an opportunity to respond to the grace of the Lord by living according to his will. Those who were Jews by birth and who properly understood the nature and the purpose of the Old Testament Law also understood that a person is not justified by what they do but by faith in Jesus the fulfilment of the Law. This was a truth that Gentiles had to learn because by nature sinful man is convinced that he can earn salvation by being the best that he can be or at least by not being as bad as someone else.

The believers in Antioch also understood that truth; and were relying on the grace of God for forgiveness and salvation. They understood that it no longer mattered what they ate or what they drank. The Old Testament Ceremonial Laws had been set aside by Christ. The need for shadows and pictures of what the Savior would do was gone because Jesus had done it all!

The grace of God would enable Peter to stand firm in his Gospel freedom and to conquer his faithless fear. It does the same for us. Emboldened by the grace of God, we can joyfully live with the confidence that our sins are forgiven, that we have been declared not guilty, that salvation and eternal life is ours. Strengthened by that grace we will also be equipped to stand firm in the Truth of the Gospel and to resist the temptation to be embarrassed by it.

Strengthened by grace we will discover there is no reason to cowardly give the impression that we agree with those who want to pervert the Truths of the Gospel with their false teaching. Paul made that same point in his conversation with Peter.

**"But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! 18) If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker.**

Those who were making trouble for Paul and the Gentile believers regarded the Gentiles as sinners because they did not follow the Old Testament Laws of Moses. Because Peter and the other believers in Antioch understood that no one is justified by keeping the Law; they had exercised their Gospel freedom and ate whatever they pleased. Peter had become a "sinner" in the eyes of the troublemakers. However, he was guilt free in the eyes of Christ who had set him free. The non-observance of the Ceremonial was not a real moral wrong. What is wrong is trying to return to the observance of the Law – rebuilding the connection that had been destroyed by Christ and the Gospel. Paul knew all about that way of life because at one time he was just like those who were causing trouble for Peter and the believers in Antioch. He had tried to obtain salvation by the Law but it didn't work. Christ called him and set him free from that futile lifestyle. He died to that way of life.

**"For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 20) I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21) I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"**

One of the purposes of the Law of God is to show sin and the futility of earning salvation. That is the effect the Law had on Paul. It showed him sin and his needed for a Savior. In a sense the Law killed any idea that Paul might had entertained about being able to please God with his own actions and earn his favor and salvation. When we come to that same conclusion; the truth that Christ did what we cannot do liberates us and sets us free. In fact, we can say as Paul does that we have been crucified with Christ. His death and punishment is our death and punishment. Christ now lives in us and now we live by faith – gladly and willingly living in agreement with God’s will as a reflection of our appreciation for the God’s grace. We live by faith in the Son of God who lived us and gave his life for us. To live in any other way would be to set aside the grace of God.

Paul’s final reminder to Peter and us is that if salvation could come from the Law then Christ’s death was in vain. It accomplished nothing and Christ’s death was useless. Nothing is father from the truth of course because as Peter, Paul, the believers in Antioch and we know -- we are justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law! Since Christ has set you free

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Amen.