

## **“WALKING RIGHT” (GALATIANS 2:11-21)**

David Hillson, Hope Church, Sunday 9 October 2011

### INTRODUCTION

This is the third in our Galatians series. Nigel started by reminding us about the importance of the gospel, not an optional extra or a special interest for advanced Christians, but the basis of all we believe and do. Then Steve Gunderson talked last time about Paul’s double passion – for the gospel and for his calling to share it, and challenged us about where our passion lies as a church and as individuals.

What’s the common theme so far?! It’s **the gospel!** But what is the gospel? It’s time to find out...

In this passage the theme of the gospel continues, with Paul sharing some important details about the gospel as a result of a dispute he had with Peter. First we’ll look at the passage and see what it says, then we’ll think about how it might apply to us.

### THE STORY [VERSES 11-13]

Here we find an account of an exchange between Paul and Peter that took place in Antioch (verse 11). We’re not sure when it happened, or precisely how it fits into the narrative in Acts, but it’s somewhere around the events recorded in Acts 15.

So what actually happened? Peter came to Antioch, presumably to visit the church there, which included new believers from both a Jewish background and also non-Jews. Peter was quite happy to mix with non-Jewish (Gentile) believers, including sharing meals together, following his earlier revelation from God that the gospel was for everyone. This is recorded in Acts 10:

- While Peter was waiting for his lunch to be served one day in Joppa, he had a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven with clean and unclean animals in it.
- God told him to eat what was there, but he refused to eat food that was ceremonially “unclean” according to Jewish law.
- God told him that everything that God has made clean was clean.
- When he woke up Peter found messengers inviting him to share the gospel with a Roman centurion – an “unclean” person according to Jewish law.
- The Holy Spirit told Peter to go with them, so he met Cornelius and his household, shared the gospel with them, and they believed in Jesus, were filled with the Holy Spirit and were baptised in water.
- Peter told the other Christians in Jerusalem about this (Acts 11:1-18), and they concluded that “to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life” (v18).

From then on Peter continued treating Gentiles and Jews the same, including when he first arrived in Antioch. The tense of the word used in verse 12 means that it was his habitual normal practice to eat with the Gentiles.

But not everyone agreed that this was the right thing to do – some thought that Gentile believers needed to keep the Jewish laws, including dietary laws and male circumcision. When some of these people turned up in Antioch, Peter changed his behaviour and stopped eating with Gentiles. Paul says this was because he was afraid of them (v12) – not that they might hurt him physically, but that they would criticise him, think badly of him, say he was doing the wrong thing, damage his reputation.

This is very different from how Peter was before. When the Jewish high priest told him to stop preaching the gospel, he said “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:27-29). Back then he was prepared to go against the Jewish authorities, but not now.

Other believers followed Peter’s example (v13), and Paul felt he had to step in. Verses 14-21 tell us what he said and why – we’ll come back to that later.

### SOME DETAILS OF THE STORY

When he first saw what was happening Paul opposed Peter to his face, because he “was clearly in the wrong” (v11 NIV). This is a legal term describing someone who stands condemned (v11 RSV) as a result of their own actions. In fact the legal imagery and language is something Paul uses later in this passage, and it is an important part of his argument.

Paul describes Peter’s behaviour as “hypocrisy” (v13 NIV), which is literally the Greek word used here. But it didn’t mean then what it means now. For us it is a negative loaded word. A hypocrite is someone whose actions don’t match their beliefs – most often used for religious people and politicians. Originally a hypocrite was just an actor playing a role, and it was common for Greek and Roman actors to wear a mask. But the ideas are linked:

- Playing a role
- Acting under false pretences
- Pretending to be something you’re not

The opposite is being authentic, honest, genuine, WYSIWYG

Paul says Peter was playing a role, pretending to be someone he wasn’t:

- Peter knew that God has declared Gentiles to be as clean as Jews, and that the gospel was for everyone who fears God and does the right thing (Acts 10:34-35). He also knew that this meant there was no ban on Jews mixing with Gentiles any more (Acts 10:28).
- But his actions in Antioch were different. He hadn’t changed his mind, he still knew what God had said was true, but his outward actions told a different story. It looked like he still believed that it was necessary for him and others to keep the Jewish law, even if you were a Christian.

And this affected others, who joined Peter in his hypocrisy. [A good example of groupthink in action!]

## WHY DOES THIS MATTER? [VERSE 14]

Paul seems to have got very heated about this. Why was he bothered over who had dinner with whom? In verse 14 he makes a very strong statement: It is because they were “not acting in line with the truth of the gospel”. Wow, how did he get that from the eating habits of Peter and the others?

“Acting in line” literally means walking right. So Paul says that hypocrisy is not doing that, it is walking crooked, going off course. This isn’t about belief but about behaviour. What Peter and the others were doing was not right. In fact it was going in the wrong direction, not lined up with the truth of the gospel. How?

The gospel is meant to act as a plumb-line or standard affecting not just what we believe but how we behave. In our statement of faith at Hope Church, we say that the Bible is “our final authority in all matters of belief and behaviour.”

## WHAT IS “THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL”? [VERSES 15-21]

So we need to know about what Paul calls here “the truth of the gospel”, as that’s what we need to line up with, to make sure that we are walking right. What is it?

Verses 15-21 contain all the key words and themes of the gospel: sin, justification, faith, Jesus Christ, grace. [though not in much detail here]

Paul uses Peter’s hypocrisy to highlight the heart of what the gospel is all about. And he uses another legal term to make his point: “justification”. This is used when someone in the dock is freely acquitted, declared not guilty, treated as if they were innocent even if they are not. All the charges against the person are dropped, no case to answer. Where there is a penalty to pay, the accused person doesn’t have to pay it because it has been settled in some other way.

The heart of the gospel is this:

- We are all in the dock before God, accused of breaking his law, obviously guilty by our own actions, facing a penalty of death and eternal separation from him.
- This includes both “good people” and “bad people” (we might say Jews and Gentiles)
- If nothing changes we stand condemned, without the right of appeal.
- The good news (“gospel”) is that there is a way of escape and rescue for us. We can be justified, acquitted, treated as innocent. We do not need to be condemned to hell. How?
- To be justified we need to have faith in what Jesus has done on the cross, paying the penalty in our place. There is no other way.
- Justification is freely offered to each one of us, as a gift of God’s grace and mercy, but we need to accept it for ourselves, by our active faith and trust in Jesus.

Fantastic! “Gospel” means good news, and the good news here is clear:

- The central need for each one of us is to be justified before God.
- The central act we must each take in order to be justified is to have faith in Jesus.
- The “truth of the gospel” is **justification by faith**.
  - Probably the first mention of this vital idea in Paul’s letters.
  - Developed in much more detail later, especially in Romans.

So what was Peter's problem? He was acting as if he needed to keep the Jewish laws about keeping himself separate from non-Jews, otherwise his behaviour would be unacceptable. He appeared to believe that this was necessary if he was to do what God wanted, otherwise he'd be doing the wrong thing and sinning before God. Peter's behaviour said that a person could be justified by keeping the Jewish law – even though he knew that wasn't true.

Paul says in verses 15-16 there are two theories on how to be justified, made right with God:

1. Observe the Jewish law, self-effort, being good trying hard
2. Have faith in Jesus, trust that I can be saved and rescued through his death

Paul says that both he and Peter know that "a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ" (verses 15-16). But this wasn't just theory for them; Paul says they acted on it – "We too have put our faith in Jesus Christ so that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no-one will be justified."

That's why Peter's actions were hypocrisy, and the danger was that others were being led astray (v13). Peter knew the truth of the gospel, but maybe others didn't. Perhaps they might end up believing that there was another way to be justified, through their own efforts to be good, and not by faith in Jesus. And that's why Paul had to step in. The truth of the gospel is too important to allow people to be led astray from it.

## THE GOSPEL HAS IMPLICATIONS

And the end of our passage (verses 20-21) emphasises this link with how we behave. The truth of the gospel is not just "for our souls" or "about our eternal destiny". It is about how we live.

Paul says in verse 20 that the death of Jesus on the cross was not just about paying the penalty for our sin so that we can be justified through faith. He says that when a person decides to follow Jesus and accept his offer of justification, something dies in that person and something else comes to life. Paul explains this all in a lot more detail in his letter to the Romans (chapters 5-8), saying that the "old me", my sinful nature, died with Jesus. In its place God has created a "new me", alive towards God. But this amazing transformation has very practical implications.

What does the life of a justified person look like? Paul says a mind-boggling thing: "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (verse 20)

It's as if Paul is dead, and Jesus is living in and through him. Or at least Paul's source of life comes from Jesus, since Jesus sacrificed himself for Paul because he loved him. So looking at how a justified person lives is like looking at Jesus!

Paul says this is not just about our soul or spirit, or about some future existence in heaven. This is about "life in the body" here and now. Everything I do is characterised by faith in Jesus, which is how I was justified and how I should continue to live.

And Paul's message to Peter is that faith in Jesus should affect whether he eats with non-Jewish believers or stays separate. It determines whether a non-Jewish male believer needs to be circumcised or not. In fact the only way we can stay right with God is by testing all that we do against our faith in Jesus – does this match what Jesus would want? (WWJD?)

## AND FINALLY

Paul did Peter a big favour in Antioch. He saw that he was acting out of line with the truth of the gospel, and he didn't let him get away with it. At first Paul spoke to Peter face to face (v11), challenging him over his behaviour and calling him back to the roots of the gospel – justification by faith. And when Paul saw that other people were being led astray as well, he spoke to Peter in public about it. [Maybe sometimes we need to do the same for each other.]

Paul knew that Peter was in danger of moving away from what God had shown him, losing his clear vision that everyone was equal before God, that there are no “good and bad people”, and that the only way any of us can be justified is through faith in Jesus, not through our own actions, or through trying to keep the Jewish law. So Paul helped Peter to recover his vision and focus on the truth of the gospel.

And if he hadn't, Christianity might have looked very different today. For example what would we have been doing yesterday (7/8 October)? Probably celebrating Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, asking God to forgive our sins of the past year (and hoping he would be merciful again). Instead we are here worshipping Jesus as our saviour and redeemer.

## SO WHAT – LESSONS FOR US TODAY

There are lots of things for us to learn from this passage. You've probably spotted some of them as we've told the story so far. But let's quickly recap and summarise what this might mean for us today.

### **1. If we are Christians, are we clear about “the truth of the gospel”?**

- Do we try to earn favour with God by the way we act, keeping rules that we think he would approve of, hoping that our good behaviour will get us into his good books?
- Do we try to justify ourselves to God by keeping the law, sticking to external regulations, showing him how good we are?
- Are we hoping to please God by our self-effort, trying harder, “being good”? All these things are characteristics of dead religion.
- Or are we clear that we stand condemned by our own sinful actions, and there is only one way we can be justified – through faith in Jesus?

**2. Are we walking right?** This is about how we live, checking that all we do is in line with the truth of the gospel, depending on God's grace and mercy, motivated by faith in Jesus. It's not about “spiritual things” or our eternal destiny; it's about what we do every day, the decisions and choices we make, the way we behave, our friendships and relationships. The truth of the gospel is precious and important – let's make sure everything we do is in line with it. When people look at us, can they see “Christ lives in me”?

**3. Are we driven off course by fear of others?** Peter became a hypocrite because he was afraid of what others would think of him. His fear of people led him to act in a way that didn't match what he really believed and knew to be true. He was playing a role behind a mask, but it wasn't real. How about us? Do we adjust our behaviour to please other people? This could affect how we are when we're doing “church things”, as well as in daily life. Peter was worried about how religious people would see him – are we?

**4. Are we hypocrites?** Are we play-acting, pretending to be what we aren't, doing things that aren't how we really feel or what we really believe? Or are we genuine WYSIWYG people? God knows what we're like anyway, we can't fool him, he sees behind our masks. Much better to trust in his grace and mercy, and be real with him – and others.

**5. Are we justified by faith?** [This is a question for Christians as well as those who aren't yet.] We need to be sure that we're not trying to defend ourselves in God's courtroom, relying on keeping some rules that we hope will please God. Instead we must have faith in Jesus – that's the only way to be justified.