

## Lesson: Hypocritical Beliefs: Paul's Disagreement with Peter

### Lesson Overview

#### Biblical Passage

Galatians 2:11-21

#### Supporting Passages

Acts 15:1-41, Galatians 1:6-10

#### Memory Verse

Galatians 2:20

#### Biblical Truth

Placing unbiblical regulations on followers of Christ is a hypocritical act against the saving grace of the gospel.

#### Context

While in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, Paul wrote letters to churches that he was guiding. To the churches in Galatia, Paul addressed the actions of the Judaizers, Jews who were insistent that Gentiles must embrace the customs of Judaism, namely circumcision and dietary practices, in order to become full-fledged Christians. This false teaching swayed many Christians. Paul rebuked Peter, who had given in to the Judaizers. Paul reprimanded them strongly for abandoning the gospel he had taught them (Gal. 1:6-9).

### Commentary

#### Investigation

Although the decision of the Jerusalem Council had acknowledged that Gentiles are released from the requirements of circumcision and obedience to the Law, these events in Antioch reveal that such distinctions were still being made. On this occasion, Peter had been living among and eating with the Gentile Christians. But when "men from James," known as Judaizers, arrived in the area, Peter followed their demands to refrain from eating with the Gentiles.

Realizing that Peter's actions were different and were causing other Jewish Christians to stop sharing meals with the Gentile Christians, Paul immediately sprang into action. Paul confronted Peter about his mistreatment of some Gentiles (non-Jews) in the church at Antioch. Paul took a stand against such behavior. He responded appropriately to the mistreatment of other believers.

#### Importance

This lesson supports the Essential Truth that [Salvation is by Faith Alone]. The Judaizers wanted Gentile believers to follow the Law as a requirement for salvation. Peter got swept up in this false teaching. Paul, however, was quick to point out that no man can be justified by observing the Law. In fact, he stated that "if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" (Gal. 2:21) This teaching was a pivotal moment in the early Church. It is imperative that adults embrace faith-based salvation if they are to be saved and grow close to God.

This lesson also covers the Essential Truths [Jesus is God and Savior] and [The Church is God's Plan].

#### Interpretation

**Galatians 2:11-12** Paul provided a general description of his confrontation with Peter while in Antioch (v. 11). The word translated as "opposed" indicates that [Paul] was proactive in his response to Peter's behavior. The phrase "to his face" indicates that this confrontation was direct and in person.

Paul then provided the reason for his confrontation of [Peter]. Before "certain men came from [James]" to Antioch, Peter shared meals with Gentile Christians. These "certain men" were Jewish believers from Jerusalem who were under the authority of James, the brother of Jesus. When these men arrived, Peter stopped eating and associating with the Gentile believers. Paul indicated that Peter's response was motivated by fear of those who "belonged to the circumcision group." The phrase "circumcision group" was a reference to the Judaizers who tried to impose conformity to Jewish Law upon the Gentile converts.

The issue of Peter's withdrawal from sharing a meal with the Gentile believers related to Jewish custom. Jews of that day considered Gentiles and their dietary practices unclean. Though God had already shown Peter that Gentiles and their food were not unclean (Acts 10:9-48), the pressure from his Jewish brothers affected his behavior. Peter's withdrawal of table

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fellowship was extremely insulting to the Gentile believers. By his behavior, Peter was relegating Gentile Christians to second-class status in the Kingdom of God.

**Galatians 2:13** Peter's influence was such that the other Jews present joined him in his [hypocrisy]. The word *hypocrisy* points to the pretentious nature of Peter's actions. Peter knew better! Peter knew that Jews did not have superior status over Gentiles in Christ's Kingdom.

The result of Peter's behavior was that "by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray." This must have been particularly hurtful to Paul. Barnabas had stood up for Paul and stood with Paul in defense of the Gentile mission. They had been missionary partners on the first missionary journey to the Gentiles. Yet Barnabas was guilty of withdrawing from sharing a meal with the Gentile Christians.

**Galatians 2:14** After Paul saw with his own eyes the behavior of Peter, Barnabas, and the other Jews, he had words with Peter in front of everyone in the Antioch church. The phrase "not acting in line" comes from a word with the literal meaning "to walk straight." When Paul saw that their behavior deviated from the gospel's truth, he confronted Peter.

Peter's behavior was not only in contradiction to what he knew to be true, but it was also a contradiction to the way that he was living (as a Gentile). Paul was saying, "Peter, if there is something wrong with the way in which Gentiles are living, why are you living like one yourself?"

**Galatians 2:15-16** Both Jews and Gentiles knew that a person is justified only by faith in Jesus Christ and not by observing the Law. They all agreed it was only through a faith relationship with Jesus that a person can be made right with God. Even the Jewish believers, including the Judaizers, agreed that no one can be made right with God by observing Jewish Law.

**Galatians 2:17** Paul showed the irrational nature of the position of "certain men from James" on Peter and other Jewish Christians eating with Gentile Christians. The certain men from James evidently asserted that Peter and the other Jewish Christians were sinning whenever they shared a meal with Gentile Christians.

Paul denied the idea that eating with Gentiles made one a sinner. In fact, Jesus Himself had called Peter to change his heart about Jewish dietary requirements (Acts 10:9-16). Could Jesus have been leading them into sin? Paul replied to such an illogical conclusion with very strong words. Translated, this phrase reads, "[Absolutely not]," which does not capture its strength. In the strongest terms, Paul confronted Peter with the truth of the gospel. That should be the starting point for every confrontation among believers.

**Galatians 2:18-19** Paul used metaphorical language to drive home his point (v. 18). The metaphor of rebuilding what one has destroyed has an ironic tone. Is it logical for a person to destroy something only to build it back? It begs the question, "Why would you tear it down to start with if you are going to build it back up?" Paul's point was that justification through Christ alone in effect destroyed the Law as a means for justification. By using the accusation that eating with Gentile believers was a sin, Peter and the others who stood with him were rebuilding the very thing (the Law) that Christ had destroyed as the means for being made right with God.

Because Christ and not the Law is the means of distinguishing someone as a member of God's community, there is no basis for differentiating between a Jewish and Gentile Christian. Both are equally justified by faith in Christ, not by practicing the Law. The purpose ("so that . . .") for which Paul died to the Law was so that his life would be lived for God.

**Galatians 2:20** Paul's daily life underwent radical transformation as a result of his commitment to Christ. The issue of table fellowship with Gentiles was no longer an issue for him because he "had been crucified with Christ and [he] no longer live[d] but Christ live[d] in [him]." To understand the magnitude of this verse as it relates to the issue of sharing a meal with Gentiles, remember that before Christ Paul's life was consumed with the Law and the religious concerns about uncleanness. His life, as it was dominated by those concerns, had been crucified.

In the second half of this verse, Paul showed that his earthly life and everything associated with it were dominated by his relationship to "the Son of God." Every decision he made was determined by his relationship with Jesus, including the decision to fellowship with the Gentiles.

The tenderness of Paul's relationship with Jesus is evident from the last phrase of this verse: "who loved me and gave himself for me." When the love of Christ captured his heart and mind, Paul's own crucifixion to everything he held dear was a no-brainer.

**Galatians 2:21** For Paul, the main issue was the Judaizers treating the Gentile Christians as if God's grace demonstrated in Christ's death was not enough to save them. Their actions proclaimed loudly that right standing with God still had to come through the Law.

Paul's point was that by virtue of Peter's actions, Peter had aligned himself with a false teaching about salvation. Paul's

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rebuke of Peter was firmly based in theological truth. Peter knew that salvation comes only through Christ and not the Law, but his actions did not line up with his beliefs.

### **Implications**

Church membership means different things to different people. For some, membership is little more than joining a club; for others, it is much more meaningful than that. Being a part of a church identifies a person as a born-again follower of Jesus Christ. Because [Salvation is by Faith Alone], the Church must take seriously its responsibility to preach biblical salvation and enable spiritual growth. When a church strays from these priorities, it is in danger of promoting hypocritical beliefs and practices.

Do you remember the "spiritual report card" that used to be on the outside of some church envelopes? As people gave, they were to report their worship attendance, daily Bible reading, Bible study attendance, and so on. It is easy to see how some new believers were led to believe that these were marks of spiritual achievement. As new believers come into the Church, they must be reminded that a Christian's behavior is the result of his or her relationship with God and not a pathway to a relationship with God.

- **How does following a set of religious rules lead to hypocritical behavior?**
- **What happens when a Christian attempt to determine another believer's faithfulness by whether he or she obeys certain rules?**
- **Which is harder: trusting Christ for salvation or working hard to earn God's favor? Why?**
- **Do you find it easier to conform to the expectations of fellow believers or to follow Christ's plan for your life? Explain.**
- **How can believers identify and remove legalistic behavior from their lives?**