

Introduction:

A. At first blush, it looks like a scene from a school lunchroom. The scene is the fellowship hall of the First Church of Antioch, a vibrant congregation about 300 miles north of Jerusalem. This was a truly international church. It was begun by Jewish believers who had fled persecution in Jerusalem. Early on, they began telling the good news of Jesus to Greeks—Gentiles—and according to Acts 11:21, *“The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. [Because Barnabas was the Son of Encouragement] When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and **encouraged** them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.”* This was a praying church, too, and eventually they sent out Paul and Barnabas as their missionaries to the Gentiles. What a great church!

At some point the Apostle Peter came to Antioch. He was the leader of Jesus’ apostles, of course, so it was a big deal to have him. But then things got dicey.

B. In Gal. 2, Paul tells the story. Turn to **Gal 2**. When Peter came to Antioch the believers shared many meals, Jews and Gentiles alike. Great fellowship! Imagine hearing the stories about Jesus from Peter himself. And imagine Peter’s excitement at hearing how all these different people had come to trust in Christ. It was a big, happy family.

Then more Jews from Jerusalem came to Antioch. They were believers in Christ, too. But when meal times came they sat off by themselves. They were distinctly uncomfortable with the Gentile believers and a kind of tension settled over everything. They’d look over at Peter

and Barnabas eating with the Gentiles and give them the evil eye. Peter knew why. Gentiles were unclean people from birth. The stain of sinfulness was on them like vulgar birthmarks. Sure, they were Christians now, and that was wonderful, but they would always be unclean Gentiles. The arched eyebrows and tight lips of the Jewish visitors made it crystal clear to Peter, and even to Barnabas that it was unseemly and inappropriate for Jews—God’s “holy ones”—to be mixing it up socially with Gentiles, even if they were Christians.

Of course, the physical mark that set Jews apart from Gentiles was circumcision. Circumcision put a man in a different spiritual class—those in God’s covenant, a holy, set apart, people. In fact, the Jews were called “holy ones” several times in the Old Testament. As God’s people, they were in a class by themselves; separate from the “unwashed masses” of the Gentiles. **The only way—the *only* way—a Gentile could change his unclean status was to become circumcised.** And this incident was all about spiritual status.

So when Peter and Barnabas and the other Antioch Jews sat with the Gentile believers, the spiritual bluebloods from Jerusalem looked askance at them because, as we all know, **you’re only as good as the company you keep.**

The shift probably seemed nonchalant when it happened. At one meal, Peter moved to sit with his grim-faced brethren, and soon Barnabas followed. Then all the Jewish believers were sitting by themselves, and the Gentile believers were left to sit by themselves, with the very strong sense that they were no longer on equal terms. Like I said, a scene from a school lunchroom.

- C. Here's how Paul described what happened in Gal 2:11-14... Think of it! Paul was something of an outsider, an apostle who had never been part of the mother church in Jerusalem. Peter, of course, was the *de facto* head of the church. And Paul took him to task in front of everyone. The tension must have sparked like a downed power line!
- D. I doubt you've ever been in a situation quite like this. This wasn't racial in the way we think of those things, and it wasn't a straightforward matter of a superiority complex. God himself had taught the Jews, as his covenant people, to "*come out from among them*"—the Gentiles. They weren't to intermarry. They weren't to allow Gentiles into the inner courts of the temple. They had to avoid eating with Gentiles lest they be unclean—not just in society's eyes, but in *God's*. The sense was that being with Gentiles—even born-again Gentiles—took the shine off godliness. That was an inbred and seemingly God-given prejudice. But Paul, a Jew himself, responded with a stinging rebuke.

I. TO REGARD ANY OTHER BELIEVER AS SECOND CLASS BECAUSE OF THEIR UNCLEAN BACKGROUND IS TANTAMOUNT TO HERESY

- A. Look again at the kind of language Paul used. In **v.13** he called this business *hypocrisy—pretense*. A hypocrite pretends to be something better than he or she is. It is **a lie lived out**. Only these folks didn't realize they were acting.

In **v.14** he says, "*I saw they were **not acting in line with the truth of the gospel.***" As Christians, they were **out of line**. They'd wandered from the narrow way to the broad road. They were trying to sing, "Jesus Paid It All," with their spiritual silver spoons in their mouths. They forgot that there are no spiritual bluebloods in God's family.

Then at the end of **v.14**, “*How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs.*” You might imagine someone protesting, “*We’re not forcing them to do anything.*” And Paul responding, “*Of course, you are. These new believers obviously want to please God. They’ve tasted a walk with the Lord, and now you—their spiritual seniors—are telling them that they’re Christian half-breeds, and the only solution is for them to be circumcised like you so that they can add to their spiritual pedigree that they, too, were circumcised as Jews.*” So here were Gentile believers being coerced into **an act that they could hold before God as a symbol of deserving his favor—a righteousness of their own added to the righteousness from Christ.**

Now Paul summarizes the only issue matters: **vv.15-16...**

II. THE ONLY ISSUE THAT MATTERS IS HOW WE ARE RECKONED AS RIGHTEOUS BEFORE GOD

- A. He is speaking directly to the Jews there who had put their faith in Christ. Why had they done that? Because they had realized that their own efforts at pleasing God by their own righteousness had fallen far short of the glory of God. His emphasis here is that, **if anyone knew their need of Christ as savior, it was Jews by birth**, those born into God’s covenant people. Even that great spiritual advantage had done them no good. That’s why they had put their faith in Christ.
- B. *Peter, think about it! Barnabas, remember what you were before Christ! You know you were **not** righteous. Your knowledge of God’s law only convinced you of your need for salvation. **Peter, don’t you remember the first time you met Jesus?** You said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a*

sinful man!” Did being Jewish help you then? No, of course not! What did it? Yes, your faith in the Jesus Christ. Anything else? No! We Jews ‘put our faith in Christ Jesus in order that we may be justified by faith in Christ [plus nothing, thank God!] and not by works of the law.’ Well, circumcision is a something you do to satisfy the law!”

But a niggling question surfaced. How can anyone who cares about righteousness think they can fellowship with unclean Gentiles and not get stained by them? So here’s Paul’s answer to that question hanging in the air: **vv.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?”* Do you understand this objection? A Jewish believer says, *“When you say Christ expects us to **fellowship** with unclean Gentiles, who have no intention of being circumcised, you’re saying that Christ promotes disobeying what God told us to do—that Christ actually **promotes** sin!”*

To which Paul thunders, *“Absolutely not!!”* **V.18**, *“If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker.”*

III. BUILDING A WALL OF SUPERIORITY BETWEEN BELIEVERS FOR ANY REASON DOES NOT PRESERVE YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. IT MAKES YOU A LAWBREAKER!

- A. Thanks to the gospel, Paul had trashed his futile dependency on his very impressive spiritual pedigree. In **Phil 3:4-9** Paul explains how thoroughly he abandoned his spiritual credentials in ...

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

*But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, **not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.***

So Paul says to all those tense listeners in the fellowship hall of the Antioch church, *“If I begin believing again that any of my Jewish credentials give me—or our Gentile brothers—a leg up on righteousness, I am rebuilding the prison that once bound me; I’m forging my own chains.”*

- B. And what would that make me? “Then I really would be a lawbreaker.” I would be breaking the law of God’s grace, defying the gospel itself, given by God and paid for by Christ Jesus!

Vv.19-21...

IV. THE ONLY WAY WE CAN LIVE FOR GOD IS IF CHRIST LIVES OUT HIS LIFE IN US

- A. Another question hanging in the air was, so what is the law of God good for if we’re not going to make Gentiles obey its basic command to be circumcised? Paul’s answer was utterly counter-intuitive. He is saying this: **The benefit of the Old Testament law, given by God, was not to render us righteous by our obedience but to show us how thoroughly sinful and hopelessly condemned we are.** *Illus.:* I’ve heard of a blunt evangelism technique when someone says they’ll go to heaven because *“I’m a good person.”* To which the evangelist replies, *“May I ask, do you love the Lord God with all your heart, mind and*

strength?” Well, not really. “Ever lusted after someone? Ever stolen anything?” And so on. Hitting them again and again with the undeniable fact that they actually are *not* a good person. That’s the Law at work.

Illus.: Did you ever hear the old rock classic that starts on a chain gang, “*Breakin’ rocks in the... hot sun, I fought the law and the... law won. I fought the law and the... law won.*” **It is only when someone realizes that they cannot face God justice, that we are condemned lawbreakers, that there is finally room for the gospel to work.**

- B. He says in v.19, “I died to the law so that I might live for God.” No Jew would have imagined such a thing. God said in his Law, in Lev. 18:5, “*Keep my decrees and laws, for the person who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD.*” But then Paul says, “*I died to the law*”?

He means, I was condemned to death by the law and actually died. And when I died, the Law no longer had jurisdiction over me. **In the ultimate irony, being free from the law I couldn’t keep, I can now live for God.**

How did he die? **V.20,** “*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live.*” Is he speaking metaphorically? Not really. We are not saved metaphorically. When Jesus died on the cross for sin, we were *in him*. That’s what we mean when we say that Jesus died for us.

- C. The wonderful result is that for the first time we can actually “live for God,” the very thing we could not do when if we tried with all our might to obey all God’s commands. I imagine Paul pointing to those Jewish brethren of his and saying, “*I don’t live for God now because I’m circumcised. I live for God because “I have been crucified with Christ and I—the old circumcised lawbreaker—no longer live, but Christ lives in me!”*”

Christ lives in us through his Holy Spirit, and we're going to think a lot about that as we go through Galatians.

- D. Imagine again all the people in that fellowship hall. Jews on one side, all the Gentiles on the other. Paul might have said to the Jews, *“Brothers, once we tried with all our might to live for God by keeping his law, but in the end the law only condemned us. We were never good enough.”*

Then Paul points to the Gentiles—people like us. *“And you lived with no thought whatsoever about the Living God. You lived to satisfy your desires, doing whatever you pleased, serving gods who were nothing at all.”*

Then to them all, he might have said, *“But now, like me, you live life in your body by faith in the Son of God. Plus nothing. He did all the work. He loved us! The Son of God loved us, no matter if we were Jews or Gentiles! And he gave himself for us. He was crucified for us that we might live for God. Think of the freedom he has given us! We can actually live for God! My fellow Jews, our previous efforts to please God by keeping his law failed and count for nothing, and my dear Gentile brothers and sisters, your sinful past and your vast distance from God doesn't count against you anymore!*

- E. **V.23**, *“I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing.” The grace of God works alone. It doesn't need nor welcome partners in giving us Christ's life.*

There's never a Help Wanted sign on the door of grace. Grace doesn't welcome the help of a Jewish heritage. Grace doesn't care if you have been in church all your life, or if you regard yourself as “a good person.” God's grace alone forgives all our sin. God's grace alone enables us to live for God. God's grace alone binds us to one another in God's

family and fits us for everlasting life. You bring *nothing* and God requires nothing but your faith that Christ does all you need—forgiving, making you holy, adopting you as God’s child, outfitting you to be Christ’s own bride.

Conclusion

The fellowship hall was a good place to learn the lesson that God’s grace alone makes us one. No one here, no matter what our backgrounds, education, or years as a Christian, comes with better credentials than someone else. It is good to aspire to be like someone who faithfully walks with Christ but there are no second-class Christians among us.

That’s not because we have *no* spiritual credentials at all. It’s because all of us whose faith is in Christ have the best. We are high-born sons and daughters of God through Christ.

Illus.: It’s probably been over 35 years ago now that a young friend called me to say she’d admitted herself to a psychiatric hospital because she was so depressed and maybe even dangerous to herself. I learned that she had been through some terrible things that would no longer hide in the darkened corners of her mind.

One of my visits was to be on Good Friday, and I asked her if she’d like me to bring Communion to her. She said she would, and then asked if some of the other Christians hospitalized there could join us.

So on that spring afternoon five or six of us gathered in her room and we shared in this meal. I think it was the most meaningful Communion service I ever shared. Half a dozen people, all scarred by heartaches, relative strangers to one another, sitting helplessly in a locked ward. Yet Jesus was there because we were there as his beloved. No one was second-class. I was humbled to be included. Jesus was not only among us, one more of us there in that room, but he was there *in us*, even as broken

people, and because of him we were one with each other. We were strengthened by his presence in us together, healed in a way, nourished and washed and rejuvenated. We had Communion ... in the fullest sense of the word.

Every promise we can make
Every prayer and step of faith
Every difference we can make
Is only by His grace
Every mountain we will climb
Every ray of hope we shine
Every blessing left behind
Is only by His grace

Grace alone Which God supplies
Strength unknown He will provide
Christ in us, our cornerstone
We will go forth in grace alone

Every soul we long to reach
Every heart we hope to teach
Everywhere we share His peace
Is only by His grace

Every loving word we say
Every tear we wipe away
Every sorrow turned to praise
Is only by His grace

Grace alone Which God supplies
Strength unknown He will provide
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