

## Lesson 4

# Paul Opposes Peter

## *Galatians 2.11-21*

### Introduction

In Galatians 2:11–21, the focus shifts from Jerusalem and its council to Syrian Antioch, the site of the inaugural church in a Gentile region. Here, Paul and Barnabas served as church leaders, assisted by three

#### **Galatians 2:11–17**

**11** But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned.

**12** For he regularly ate with the Gentiles before certain men came from James. However, when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, because he feared those from the circumcision party.

**13** Then the rest of the Jews joined his hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

**14** But when I saw that they were deviating from the truth of the gospel, I told Cephas in front of everyone, "If you, who are a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel Gentiles to live like Jews?"

**15** We are Jews by birth and not "Gentile sinners,"

**16** and yet because we know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we ourselves have believed in Christ Jesus. This was so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no human being will be justified.

**17** But if we ourselves are also found to be "sinners" while seeking to be justified by Christ, is Christ then a promoter of sin? Absolutely not!

others as mentioned in Acts 13:1. Paul further underscores his apostolic authority by detailing an instance where he corrected even Peter, widely regarded as the foremost apostle in the early church. Paul first outlines Peter's departure from the gospel's principles and then uses that context to depict the gospel in its genuine form.

Before Peter's alignment with the Judaizers could deeply impact the Antioch church, God intervened through Paul to promptly address the misconception. In the process, He offered Paul a compelling testament to his apostolic authority. God often finds purpose even in challenging situations, transforming potential setbacks into moments of glory and fortification for His church.

Although we cannot be sure, the incident of Galatians 2.11-14 should probably be dated *after* the Jerusalem conference of Acts 15, although we cannot be certain. It does make sense, however, that Paul is explaining things in a chronological manner, after the conference Paul and Barnabas dwelled in Antioch for some time, Acts 15:35. Peter's actions here are somewhat surprising, especially in light of his interaction with Cornelius in Acts 10-11 and the events at the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15. Reconciling his words in 15:7-11 with his actions here is very hard to figure out. But this behavior does seem to be a part of his nature, Matthew 14:28, 30; John 13:8, 9; 13:37, 18:25-27.

## Peter's Inconsistency

When Peter came to Antioch, his actions were inconsistent with gospel teaching. At first, he showed no preference for Jews over Gentiles. He ate with those who were uncircumcised with no outward problems. Then, after the arrival of men who claimed to have been sent by James, Peter changed his actions, 2:12. Paul said he *began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision*. In other words, Peter completely reversed himself. It is important to remember that although his conduct was out of line, Peter had not reversed his doctrinal stance. His standing as a leading apostle had tremendous influence on others, so much that a good number of Jewish Christians followed his example. Even Barnabas *was carried away by their hypocrisy*, 2:13.

### Galatians 2:18–21

**18** If I rebuild those things that I tore down, I show myself to 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 comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Where was Paul while this was going on? We are not privy to that information. But when Paul found out, he confronted Peter in front the others. The contents of verses 15-21 are directed to Peter as part of Paul's rebuttal of their practices. Paul charged Peter with hypocrisy. Before the teachers from Jerusalem appeared, Peter had been carrying on with Gentiles, eating with and in full fellowship with them. He had no problem living like a Gentile, but after the arrival of the teachers he required the Gentiles to live like Jews. He could not have it both ways!

## Paul Died to Law

Jews who became Christians admitted that they believed the works of the Law were not adequate for salvation. They had proclaimed faith in Christ for salvation. At one time, Peter had defended his eating with Gentiles, Acts 11:1-18. But here, in Galatians 2:12-13, Peter had changed his actions. If eating with Gentiles was sinful, Paul says that that would make Jesus a *minister of sin*. *May it never be*, 2:17. By his actions, Peter had once again begun to build the "wall" between Jews and Gentiles, 2:18. This was something he had been working on tearing down through his teaching of the gospel. Here, Paul is driving home the point that Peter's actions in Antioch did not live up to what he preached and believed.

Through his allegiance to Christ, Paul died to Law. He ceased to trust in it for salvation. The law and all its traditions and ordinances no longer had control over him. He no longer had to abide by the requirements of the law, which disallowed association with Gentiles, or the eating of "unclean" foods.

Galatians 2:20 is one of the most well-known verses in the New Testament. Paul speaks of the type of relationship he had with Jesus. He had died with Christ and now had an ongoing relationship with Him. Jesus now had control over his life. He lived by faith in the Son of God who died a vicarious death to save

mankind from sin. Salvation was not in himself, but in Jesus Christ. Paul wraps up chapter two by capping off his argument. If what the Judaizing teachers were teaching was true, then Christ died in vain. They maintained that righteousness came through the Law. It does not. Christ died to take the Law out of the way.

## Galatians for Today

### There are still false brethren who teach false doctrine.

There is a right way and a wrong way in religion. We must make certain we abide in the doctrine of Christ, 2 John 9; Jude 3-4. It makes no difference if a person sincerely believes false doctrine to be truth, or if he willingly spreads something that he knows to be false. Propagators of false doctrine will stand in danger of judgment. Knowledge of this fact should heighten our dedication to discern God's will as it has been revealed in the scriptures, Ephesians 5:17.

### We must remain committed to doctrinal purity

Galatians 2:3-5 presents a strong contrast between true and false doctrine; freedom in Christ and bondage of a system of works. Wherever Paul went, whenever he taught, he was committed to doctrinal purity. He disciplined himself to communicate effectively and accurately what had been given to him. As we teach and preach, this must be our first responsibility. It takes effort to understand the writing and instruction of the apostles. It is not a trivial matter. We must remain committed to doctrinal purity. We live in a time where there seems to be a decreased emphasis on *doctrine*. Doctrine is looked upon as being "divisive" and "impossible to understand." This is a symptom of living in the post-modern culture where relativism is the norm. Despite the cry to move away from absolutes, scripture is complete with absolutes that we must stand upon if we are to maintain doctrinal purity.

### Our actions can lead others astray

Peter's hypocrisy led several Jewish Christians and even Barnabas away from consistent Christian living. They were requiring the Gentiles to do something they did not have to do. While there are many wonderful Christian leaders that we may seek to emulate, we must be aware that, like Peter, they are fallible and capable of falling short. Peter's hypocrisy had tremendous ramifications. Some have speculated that the relationship between Paul and Barnabas was damaged because of Barnabas being *carried away* under Peter's influence. This argument may or may not be valid, but it is interesting that right after this Luke records that Paul and Barnabas got into such a disagreement that they parted ways, Acts 15:38-41. While it is obvious that the crux of their disagreement was over John Mark, could their relationship have begun to deteriorate after the incident with Peter? One can only wonder.

### Christians live for God

Like Paul, we must put to death our old self and fully commit to living for Jesus. We must allow Jesus to control our life through the influence of His revealed word. Allowing this to happen will require faith on

our part. But is there really any other way? Righteousness does not come through works of merit; it comes through grace and our response to Jesus in faith.

## For Thought and Reflection

1. Given Peter's previous experiences and knowledge, what do you believe motivated him to act hypocritically in Galatians 2:11-14?
2. How do Peter's actions in this passage reflect the tension between Jewish and Gentile believers in the early church?
3. In what ways does the situation between Peter and Paul demonstrate the importance of confronting others when they are in error?
4. Drawing from Peter's previous inconsistencies (Matthew 14:28, 30; John 13:8, 9; 13:37, 18:25-27), how do we reconcile with the idea that even strong leaders can have moments of doubt or fear?
5. How does Paul's approach in confronting Peter serve as an example for us today when dealing with disagreements or inconsistencies within the church?
6. Considering Paul's statement in Galatians 2:20, how should the modern Christian understand and internalize the concept of living for Christ?
7. How can Christians today ensure they remain committed to doctrinal purity in a culture that often promotes relativism?
8. Reflecting on the impact of Peter's actions on Barnabas and possibly even on the relationship between Paul and Barnabas, how can we be more aware of the ripple effects our choices have on the community of believers?

9. In what ways can believers today safeguard themselves from unintentionally leading others astray with their actions or beliefs?
  
10. Considering the overall message of Galatians 2, how can Christians ensure they are not just adherents of doctrine but also live out their faith in genuine, consistent ways??