

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

When Grace Leaves Home

Third Sunday After Pentecost

June 13, 2010

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Galatians 2:15-21

"We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' 16 know that a man is not justified by observing 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 observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified. 17 "If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! 18 If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am 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 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!"

If you look closely at your service leaflet, you'll see that this passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians is in quotation marks. The reason is that immediately before this part of his letter, Paul describes a major conflict he had with the apostle Peter in the city of Antioch. Some background: Antioch was the third-largest city in the Roman Empire. When persecution drove the first Jewish Christians out of Jerusalem, some went there. They proclaimed Jesus, and great numbers of gentile pagans became Christians. Word got back to Jerusalem that there was a gentile church growing in Antioch, so they sent Barnabas there, and it continued to grow under his leadership. Barnabas went to Tarsus and brought Paul to Antioch to help. It seems that it was during this period the Lord instructed Peter to go to the home of Cornelius, the gentile Roman centurion. As a result,

Cornelius' whole household had been instantly converted when the Holy Spirit fell on them as Peter told them about Jesus. So Peter realized God was working among the gentiles.

At some point Peter joined Paul and Barnabas in Antioch. In the few verses just preceding our reading, Paul says everything was going fine. Like Paul and Barnabas, Peter socialized and ate with the gentile Christians. They were living like gentiles. But then, says Paul, a group of Jewish-background Christians from Jerusalem came to visit. They were shocked that Paul and Peter and Barnabas were socializing with the gentile believers—even though the gentiles were Christians. The influence of the Jerusalem visitors caused Peter and even Barnabas to fall back into their old Jewish customs, including separating themselves from gentiles.

Paul was outraged. He tells his readers how he responded: **“¹⁴ When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter 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?’”** That’s verse 14, and he folks who translated the New International Version of the Bible from which this is taken decided that our passage this morning is a continuation of what Paul tells his readers he told Peter on that day:--hence, the quotation marks.

It’s hard for us to grasp how serious this conflict was, but think about it. Jesus was a Jew. All his disciples were Jews. The Christians in Jerusalem never stopped being part of the Jerusalem Jewish community. They lived by what Paul calls “the works of the law”—the lifestyle of Judaism. They worshiped Jesus in their homes, but they also worshiped in the temple and in the synagogues, just as they always had. They circumcised their male children as they always had. They kept apart from gentiles as they always had. Jerusalem was the home of the first Christian church, and it was Jewish.

You can understand then, that when these leaders of the “home” church in Jerusalem came to Antioch and saw their Jewish brothers living like gentiles, they were upset. Of course, these Jerusalem leaders understood the grace of God in Jesus. They had put their faith in Jesus, the Messiah, the hope of Israel and the nations, the other peoples, tribes and ethnic groups of the human race. But for them it was obvious that Jesus was the **Jewish** Messiah. They saw with their own eyes that God was pouring out his grace on gentiles by the growing Antioch church. No doubt they rejoiced at what God was doing. But from their point of view these gentiles had to become Jews. They had to be “Judaized”, so to speak. They had to be circumcised, keep the Sabbath, eat kosher foods, and keep away from gentiles, just like the believers did back home in Jerusalem.

So here we have the first conflict in Christianity: the “home” church against the “daughter” church. Paul courageously confronts Peter and Barnabas and the “home church” leaders by insisting that Jesus came to do what no religious system, Jewish or gentile can do: justify sinners before God. Not that the law is bad or obsolete. Not at all. It comes from God and is absolute. In Romans 7:12 he says, **“The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, and righteous and good.”** But he also understands that the commandments of God include the death penalty for anyone who breaks them—and everyone, Jews and gentiles alike, break them.

Paul’s point is that the same law that prescribes the death penalty for sinners sets sinners free forever because Jesus died for them. Let me illustrate: If I were to rob the bank across the street tomorrow, the laws of Virginia say I’d have to serve a jail sentence for my crime. But it’s the same laws of Virginia that say that after I’ve served my sentence, I can’t be arrested and tried again for having robbed the bank across the street on June 14, 2010. I’ve already served my sentence. My debt to society has been paid.

In exactly the same way, the law of God itself says the penalty for breaking the law of God is death. But God’s grace in Jesus satisfied both the commandments of the law and the penalty of the law. Jesus revealed to Paul that his death on the cross paid the death penalty for every person who puts his or her faith in him. When Christ died, as far as God is concerned, so did we. Our debt to God for those who sin against God has been paid—in Christ. That’s what Paul means in verses 19 and 20 of our reading from Galatians: **“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 live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”**

All their lives, the Jewish-background believers from Jerusalem studied God’s law and lived according to their customs and traditions based on God’s law. While they understood that Jesus wonderfully fulfilled God’s law, they couldn’t imagine how a person could stay faithful to God and not live like a Jew, separate from gentiles, and following the law. Their Jewish lifestyle and works of the law was how they assured themselves they were “getting it right”. By being part of the Jewish community that practiced their lifestyle they could feel part of the community that was “getting it right”. It was threatening for them to even think about mixing with people who didn’t share their lifestyle because they might find themselves influenced in ways that would keep them from “getting it right.”

But what Paul understood through Jesus was that no one can possibly “get it right” without God’s grace. That’s why he says in these words addressed to

Peter: **“¹⁵ We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' ¹⁶ know that a man is not justified by observing 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 observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”** Being “justified” means being right with God, innocent of any sin. Only God’s grace is what makes it possible for any human being to be justified with God. But we sinful human beings always try to add other things. That’s the point Jesus makes in the little parable he tells in our gospel reading.

Two people owe the same man money. One owes roughly \$87,500. The other owes him about \$875. Jesus says, **“⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both.”**

The error Jesus’ host is making is the same one the Jerusalem church leaders are making: they think their debt to God is much less than the gentiles because of their righteous Jewish lifestyle. In the terms of the parable, they only owe him the \$875—the gentiles and the sinful woman owe the \$87,500. But they’re forgetting the debtors’ situation in Jesus’ parable: **“Neither of them had the money to pay him back.”** Small or great, sin against God must be paid. The penalty is death. None of us is exempt. But God loves us without limit. He extends us his grace and cancels our debt through the gift of Christ’s death on the cross.

The leaders from the “home church” in Jerusalem had experienced God’s grace at home, but when they got out among the gentiles, they were shocked. People who had been idol-worshiping pagans could actually be disciples of the same Jesus they believed in and not live their Jewish lifestyle! I don’t think they got out of Jerusalem very often.

It was only God’s grace that brought the power and love and new life of Christ to the disciples in the rapidly-growing church in Jerusalem, not their faithful Jewish lifestyle. It was only God’s grace that was converting the gentiles out of paganism in Antioch. It’s only God’s grace that you and I have been drawn to trust in Christ through our Christian heritage in the greatest country in the history of human civilization and enjoy prosperity and health and comfort that in ages past were unimaginable to even kings and queens. We’ve done nothing to deserve it or earn it.

I think that as American evangelical Christians we’re sometimes like those Jewish disciples from the “home church”. We take comfort in our Christian heritage, lifestyle and attitudes. We don’t get out of our little Jerusalem very often, and we need to.

I meet every Wednesday morning with a group of clergy most of whom are extremely liberal. We frequently disagree on our interpretation of the Bible. But I'm often amazed at the depth of their understanding of the Scriptures and the way God works in their lives and ministries. I wouldn't have that opportunity if I hadn't made room for it in my schedule. Sometimes it's uncomfortable and irritating. But I need that discomfort to remind myself that it's only God's grace that keeps me in relationship with God—and these men, for all our disagreements, know that for themselves as well.

I think we all need to get out of our little Jerusalem once in a while and see what happens when grace leaves home, so to speak. We can't compromise the truth of the gospel, of course. But Paul says that's exactly what Peter and Barnabas were doing by separating themselves from the gentile Christians. God's grace has to be taken straight—without any thing mixed in. When we allow ourselves to rely on anything besides the grace of God for the love and favor of God, we're nullifying his grace. To paraphrase Paul at the end of our reading **“I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law [or my Christian lifestyle], Christ died for nothing!”**

Let us pray.

Lord God, it is only by your grace, which we don't deserve and cannot earn, that you have included us in your family. Open our eyes to see the magnitude of what you have done for us, and keep us faithful to see your grace at work in those who most differ from us, in Jesus' name. Amen.