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Galatians 2:11-16 “How to Live Consistently with Gospel Truth”

Intro. A man was sitting at a stop light one morning. The lady in front of him was going through papers on the seat of her car, and when the light changed to green, she did not obey its command. She remained in her idle position until the light turned red again. So he began screaming epithets and beating on his steering wheel. His expressions of disgust were interrupted by a policeman, gun drawn, tapping on his window. Against his protests of, “You can't arrest me for hollering in my car,” the officer ordered him into the back seat of his police car. After about two hours in a holding cell, the arresting officer advised him he was free to go. He said, “I knew you couldn't arrest me for what I was yelling in my own car. You haven't heard the last of this.” The officer replied, “I didn't arrest you for shouting in your car. I was directly behind you at the light. I saw you screaming and beating your steering wheel, and I said to myself, “What a jerk. But there is nothing I can do to him for throwing a fit in his own car.” Then I noticed the cross hanging from your rear view mirror, the bright yellow “Choose Life” license tag, and the “Jesus Is Coming Soon” bumper sticker, and I thought you must have stolen the car.”¹

I believe that illustrates a significant problem in the Christian community. So often, our behavior is inconsistent with our professed belief. We say we believe one thing, and then we behave in a manner that is inconsistent with that belief. Do you know that people call that? It is called hypocrisy, as in v.13. Many people seem to want to separate belief and behavior. But you must not do that! We can see the relationship between the two in chapter 2. Notice in v.5 Paul speaks about “the truth of the gospel.” There he is speaking about belief or doctrine. But later in v.14 he rebukes Peter for not living “according to the truth of the gospel.”

Allow me to review the story of our text. In v.11 we read that Peter had come to Antioch,² a large missionary church made up of both Jews and Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas were two of the pastors of that church. In vv. 12 & 14 we learn that at least at Antioch, Peter had adopted a lifestyle that was similar to that of Gentile Christians, and very dissimilar to that of other Jews. He ate with Gentile believers. The tense of the verb tells us that it became a practice of Peter to eat with the Gentiles. He probably even ate Gentile food. He could have been eating “baby back” barbecued spare ribs or shrimp scampi on this occasion! At first he was enjoying his freedom in Christ. After all, he had been given the vision of the sheet. He had learned that it was wrong to regard as “unclean” that which God had cleansed (Acts 10:9-16). He had learned from Jesus that foods do not defile a man (Mt. 14:1-20; Mark 7:18-19). If the ceremonial ordinances regarding eating and drinking were not to be imposed upon the Gentiles, they should not be saddled upon the Jews either. Peter had learned from his experience with the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius that if God accepts Gentiles, then he should too (Acts 10:34-35). So in Antioch it was understood that the unity of the church, consisting of Jew and Gentile, demanded eating and drinking together in sweet fellowship, with restrictions reduced to the very minimum (cf. Acts 15:20, 29).

Then, something happened that changed all that! Into the picture come “certain individuals

¹ Author unknown, via Bernie Koerselman, Pulpit Helps, March 2004, p. 11.

² McNight: It is not completely clear when Peter “came to Antioch” but Acts 12:17 is as much evidence as we have. Luke tells us there that after Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison, he “left for another place.” He knew he had to vacate Jerusalem temporarily because of the persecution (cf. 12:18-19). It is as likely as anything else that Peter departed from Jerusalem not long after he had given Paul the “right hand of fellowship” (Gal. 2:9).

from James” (v.12). I believe they had a distinctively Jewish look about them. They came from the church at Jerusalem, a church in which James occupied a position of special prominence. James did not necessarily send them, but he could have. James was very concerned about Jewish Christians being obedient to the Mosaic law (see Acts 21:18-26). And within the context of evangelizing Jews, that was proper. He may have given permission for this group to visit Antioch, and see how the church was doing. But this delegation probably had their own agenda. And there were shocked to see Jewish and Gentile believers enjoying fellowship with one another and sharing meals at the same table. That was a rare sight for Jews. And so gradually [as implied in the tense of the verb], and possibly reluctantly, Peter began to withdraw³ from the Gentile believers and eventually became totally separate. Perhaps such a withdrawal and separation even took place at church, at one of the church suppers. The Jews sat at one table, and the Gentiles at another. The table that had functioned wonderfully as a symbol of unity had become a table of separation once again for Peter.

In v.11 we see that Paul rebuked Peter. The basic problem was that Peter was not living according to the truth of the Gospel of grace. Peter was not unlike most Christians in finding it difficult to be consistent in spiritual commitment. How many of us act differently depending upon who we are with?

Now the consequences of not correcting this problem are serious. This problem adversely affects our witness. I believe that more people would believe our gospel if more Christians would live out the gospel in their lives. Also, this problem of inconsistent behavior tends to lead others astray. Many followed Peter’s bad example, as we see in v.13. Furthermore, this problem was splitting the church! They had segregation between Jews & Gentiles even in the Church! Their love-feast became a snub feast!

This evening, I want to take you on a journey through the steps necessary to living a consistent Christian life. The first step is:

I. KNOW AND BE GUIDED BY THE TRUTH OF GOSPEL

One lesson of this text is that we must be careful to discern the true gospel. And the reason I start with an appeal to make sure you know and understand the gospel is that right doctrine is the foundation of right living. Paul knew that the proper standard of conduct is “the truth of the gospel” (v.14). As Paul analyzed the situation, He saw that Peter and the others “were not straightforward.” We get our word “orthopedic” from the Greek word used here (*orthopodeo*). They were not walking straight with their feet, but contrary to the truth of the Gospel. Even Peter was misled because he failed to apply Gospel truth to every situation he faced. His behavior was wrong because he failed to hold to right theology. That is why truth is more important than outward harmony. Peace that is preserved by compromising God's truth is the pseudo-peace of the world and is not of God. So beginning in v.15, Paul reasserts right doctrine, for before you can get a person to live like a Christian, you must first get that person to believe and think like a Christian.

For 15 years Dennis Prager asked high school students throughout America whether, in an emergency situation, they would save their dog or a stranger first. What would you do? Most students answered that they would not save the stranger first, but their dog. They would say, "I love my dog, I don't love the stranger." Feelings have supplanted God or religious principle as the moral guide for many young people.⁴ How sad!

Now to be guided by the truth, you must first know the truth. There are 3 aspects of the

³ “Withdraw” is from *hupostello*, a term used for strategic military disengagement.

⁴ From *Good News*. No other details recorded.

gospel that are especially relevant to the situation described here in our text, and similar situations today. If you are going to live right, you must fully know these gospel truths, and then continually let these truths guide your actions. In response to the failure of Peter and others, Paul takes the opportunity to remind them and us of the basics of the gospel. First of all:

A. The True Gospel Is a Gospel of Grace - Paul refers yet again to salvation by grace in v.21. He affirms strongly in v.16 that we are not saved by human effort in keeping Jewish law, but by faith in the sacrifice of Jesus for our sin. Salvation is all of grace.

Thus, we are to relate to others in the same way God relates to us. We should extend God's grace to others. The problem is, we have a hard time treating others in a way that is consistent with the way God treats us. God accepts us based on grace. We should be gracious toward others.

B. The True Gospel Is For All - If salvation is all of grace, and not based on merit or other human factors, then it is for all. Peter was wrong because he failed to perceive the full implication of the gospel when applied to Gentiles. From his experience with the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius, Peter himself would state at the Jerusalem conference that God had "put no difference between us and them" (Acts 15:9). God's design was for all people to come to him through Christ and in the Spirit. All people may be found acceptable to God simply by surrendering in faith to Jesus Christ.

Thus, there should be no social barriers to salvation or fellowship. As Paul later says in this letter, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:28).

C. The True Gospel Is a Gospel of Liberty - In v.12a Paul affirmed Peter's exercise of Christian liberty, in eating with the Gentiles. Paul said in v.19, "For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God." Paul found that the Law provided no remedy for sin, but rather condemned him hopelessly. The Law had fulfilled its purpose of leading him to repentance and faith in Christ. Now, as he says in v.20, we are governed by a higher and better Guide, the indwelling presence of Christ. We are not only guided by that indwelling Presence, but we are enabled by His Spirit.

Thus, we should not impose Jewish laws of separation and diet upon others. Such laws had an important purpose, but now that Christ has come, we are not bound by such laws, and Jewish believers certainly shouldn't impose such laws upon Gentiles. Likewise, we should never impose upon other personal convictions, or church traditions, that are not clearly confirmed by New Testament truth.

So again, in order to live right, you must know the truth of the gospel, and be guided by that truth. I have shown you some of the essential aspects of that gospel, and some examples of how that should impact our daily lives. Now I want to move to the second step in living a consistent Christian life:

II. BEWARE WHEN OUR PRACTICES CONTRADICT THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL

Remember, Peter would agree that we cannot be saved by keeping the law. He would never say that a Gentile would have to keep Jewish law to be saved. He would agree that salvation is all of grace, not law. But here is an example where our practice may contradict what we say and believe. In v.14b Paul said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?" In other words, at one time Peter had applied New Testament doctrine to his daily life. But now Peter was making a

distinction between Jew and Gentile. Peter had actually perverted the gospel itself with his behavior. Peter's gospel had shifted from "salvation for all without social restrictions" to "salvation for Jews alone," and those who convert to Judaism.

That is why Paul asked in the last of v.14 says, "why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?" The word translated "compel" (*anagkazo*) is a strong word, meaning, "to compel or constrain by force or threats against one's will."⁵ Here in Galatians the same word is used in reference to some trying to compel Gentile believes to be circumcised (2:3, 6:12). So in essence, Paul is saying here, "It is undeniable that by separating yourself from the Gentiles at dinner, you are saying to them, 'If you Gentiles wish to have fellowship with us, you will have to adopt our Jewish laws & customs.'" The Gentiles had only one of two choices: either refuse to obey the law in this respect and thus further contribute to a split in the Christian church, or preserve harmony by coming under the Law. So Peter's action of refusing to eat with the Gentiles involved the *forcing* of that law upon the Gentile Christians. Such was probably not the intention of Peter, but it was precisely what the Judaizers wanted. He was violating one truth of the gospel, and that is the principle of Christian liberty.

Now, review with me the truths of the Gospel, and let's examine how *our* behavior may contradict those truths. For example, we may say the gospel is for all, and yet do nothing to reach all with the gospel. If you have a black neighbor or co-worker, will you refuse to witness to him because he's black? And since the gospel is for all, there are no social barriers to salvation or fellowship. We can never tolerate the demand of social conformity as one of the essentials of the gospel. The Christian church cannot be what it is called to be when ritual, race, class, or other distinctions separate members from each other.

What shall we do regarding youth culture today? Suppose a young person comes to church with weird hair, a spiked dog collar around his neck, low baggy pants, and sporting some earrings. Shall we insist that a young person look a certain way before we lead them to Christ, and accept them into the membership of the church? Should I insist that a young person get rid of his earring before I baptize him? We are right to expect repentance, and a surrender to the Lordship of Jesus, but are we right to impose our white suburban Christian culture upon him? Some fundamentalist churches impose certain rules that give their group a well-defined boundary and identity. And if you do not conform to those rules, you are not accepted into the fellowship. Is that living by the truth of grace, liberty, and inclusiveness? No! This corresponds quite well to the situation the early Jewish Church was facing regarding accepting Gentiles into the Church. I call upon all of us to courageously live according to gospel truth.

I want to conclude the message by being very practical. There is one more step to living a consistent Christian life that I see in our text:

III. BEWARE OF THE FACTORS THAT MAY LEAD TO LIVING INCONSISTENTLY WITH THE TRUTH OF GOSPEL

There are 3 factors that are found in this text, and they are related, and they all have a bearing upon the inconsistent behavior of believers today.

A. Fear – One main reason for inconsistent living is expressed in v.12c. Notice that Peter was "fearing those who were of the circumcision." He withdrew because he was afraid that the Jews would censure his conduct and that they would weaken his prestige in Jerusalem, and might

⁵ McNight says, "This word *force* is the most important word in this verse, for it tips us off as to what Peter was doing."

even cause him to be persecuted. Perhaps Peter was still smarting from his time in prison (Acts 12). Peter and the other Jewish believers were intimidated by the Judaizers into going against the truth of their convictions and consciences. The same old cowardly fear that he showed the night of Christ's betrayal overcame him again.

Remember, the answer to fear is faith in a God who is greater than your fear. God had already shown Himself strong on Peter's behalf in delivering him from prison. Faith will give you courage in the face of persecution, or other adversity. So don't let fear of others cause you to disobey God.

B. Following Bad Examples – It's not that Peter deliberately solicited the other Christian Jews of Antioch to follow him. They just followed his example. Many people are followers. They just do what their leaders do. But what happens when a leader does what is wrong? After all, this text clearly demonstrates the fact that at times, even great leaders will fail.⁶ Are you to follow them in doing wrong? No. As we have seen, you are to be guided by the truth of God's Word, and not wholly by your Christian leaders. You are never excused for following a bad example. Sin is sin, no matter who does it. If your parent, or teacher, or preacher, or President are doing wrong, God still holds you responsible for doing right!

There is a related lesson here. One wrong step can lead others into sin. Most of us lead in some area. If you are a parent, you are a leader of your children. Don't tell them, "Don't take drugs" and yet, if you drink alcohol, they will likely follow your negative example by drinking or taking drugs. If you are a deacon, S.S. teachers, or Church Council member, you are a leader. When we fail to live our lives consistently with our beliefs, then we not only hurt ourselves, but also others who follow us. Cf. Rom. 14. Those of use who are leaders have a special responsibility to do what is right, because people are watching us, and they tend to follow our example.

C. Peer Pressure – When the courage of Peter was oozing out, faint-heartedness also took possession of "the rest of the Jews." They joined in his hypocrisy. Even Barnabas followed Peter!⁷ Peter failed because of fear. Others failed because of Peter's example. But Barnabas failed because of the overwhelming numbers who were joining Peter. Barnabas was the last to join Peter & the others Jews, for he was generous in his attitude toward Gentiles. Yet, as the pressure to conform mounted, even Barnabas withdrew from the Gentile believers. Exodus 23:2 says, "You shall not follow a crowd to do evil..." Just because a whole crowd of Jews followed Peter's example did not excuse Barnabas, or anyone else. Too often, we are driven by the winds of fear and peer pressure.

Our dear young people face this problem to a more significant degree than most of us. Young people fear ridicule and rejection by their peers. And so they are constantly tempted to compromise their Christian beliefs in order to fit in with the ungodly crowd at school, or on the sports team. They face great pressure to drink, use drugs, engage in immoral sexual practices, and live lives that are essentially unholy and displeasing to God. I pray that our young people will be fearless in standing for the Lord and their Christian beliefs. However, peer pressure may be as much a part of the adult life as it is of the teenage years. Even in the church, we may fail to live out the full implications of the Gospel because we fear the potential displeasure of others. As Hudson Taylor experienced criticism for adopting the Chinese way of life, so many Christians today experience criticism for expressing Christian freedom, or doing something significant for God. It

⁶ Though millions today regard Peter as the first Pope, he showed, at least in this instance, that he was far removed from infallibility.

⁷ It may have been Barnabas' hypocrisy on this occasion that began the eventual rift with Paul that a short while later resulted in their separation over taking John Mark on the next journey (Acts 15:37-40).

doesn't seem to matter what decisions we make; someone will criticize our choices. If we are handcuffed by a fear of people's criticisms, we will never accomplish anything. Peter made a bad decision when he felt that pressure; we will too. But God calls us to a fearless obedience of His will as we live in the Spirit. What we need is courage, courage to live according to our faith and its implications rather than according to our emotions, fleeting passions, and fear of others.

Conclusion: The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego is the classic story of courage in the face of threats, bad examples, and peer pressure. They were given an ultimatum: Bow to the king's idol, or burn in a fiery furnace. The day of testing came, and we read in Daniel 3:7 that "all the people, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the gold image which King Nebuchadnezzar had set up." Only 3 stood firm, and would not bow. The king heard of this, and gave them another opportunity. Instead of bowing to the pressure, they gave a defiant answer of great faith in God. They were confident that God was able to deliver them. And even if God didn't, they would nevertheless remain true to their convictions. Then, Nebuchadnezzar seemed to go wild with fury. His face was distorted with anger, and he shouted the command that they should heat the furnace seven times hotter than it was usually heated. The soldiers threw them into the furnace that was so hot, the executioners themselves were burned. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego were not burned. Instead, a fourth person was seen walking in the furnace with them, one like the Son of God!

Oh, friend, if you courageously put your faith in God, and stand for the truth, you will experience God's deliverance, or at least God's presence in a special way that will more than compensate for the trial you face. By faith trust God for the courage to live each day consistently with the Gospel of truth.

Sources: W.A. Criswell, *Expository Sermons on Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Galatians & Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968); John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987); Scot McKnight, *The NIV Application Commentary: Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Lehman Strauss, *Devotional Studies in Galatians and Ephesians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1957); Curtis Vaughan, *Galatians: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon tape on this text dated 8/26/84); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Free: Galatians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1975); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Galatians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1944, 1973). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).