

OAKRIDGE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

January 27, 2019

“Live By Faith, Choose Grace”

Galatians 2: 11-21

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This is the 3rd in a series on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, and Rev. Ed has been leading Bible studies each week using the Scripture that the message will be based on the following week. I sat in on this week’s Bible Study and heard a lot of good questions and much evidence of thoughtful reading and re-reading – it was impressive, and also demonstrates a strong desire to study Scripture within its social context and its current relevance for God’s people - the need for prayerful study is key to understanding.

For those who attended on Wednesday night, I hope this message speaks to your questions, if it doesn’t, feel free to follow-up with Rev. Ed next Wednesday.

The scene begins with a very angry Paul, *“when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned;”* Paul could not believe that Cephas (or Simon Peter), as well as other Jews, and even Barnabas, could have done such an about face in their Christian practices.

In order for us to understand the emotion behind his words we need to look at a few chapters in the Book of Acts. In chapter 9 we are told of the conversion of Saul, a young man, persecutor of Christians, who becomes known as Paul, a champion of Christ, intent on spreading the Gospel of forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Now Paul went to Jerusalem to seek out the apostles in order to join them, but the apostles were afraid of Paul, all accept Barnabas who vouches for Paul, *“describing how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus”* (9:27). Barnabus was someone he was sure he could always count on. Then in chapter 10 we read about Peter having the vision of unclean animals descending from Heaven and a voice saying, *“Get up, Peter; kill and eat.”* ¹⁴ *But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.”* ¹⁵ *The voice said to him again, a second time, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”* ¹⁶ *This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.* Then Cornelius, a Gentile comes to Peter at the Lord’s calling, and Peter understands his vision - ... *Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality,* ³⁵ *but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. (10:34)* ⁴⁵ *The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,* ⁴⁶ *for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said,* ⁴⁷ *“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit*

just as we have?”⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.
(45-48)

Peter had reason to know his behavior was wrong. He hadn't waited for Cornelius and his family to become Jews first before he baptized them as Christians. It's all grace, the Spirit's working, God's work - human ceremonies and works are at an end. We see Peter knew this.

Peter used to eat with the Gentiles.

Part of the life of the early Church included having a common meal which they called the *Agape* or Love Feast. Everyone in the congregation would come together pooling whatever resources they had to enjoy a common meal, and William Barclay writes that this was likely the best meal slaves would get all week – in a very special way it marked the togetherness of the church, and now, because of “certain people”, a circumcision party, fear had begun to erode the community of believers. Peter separated himself from the uncircumcised and because he was afraid to rebuke the certain people from James' church, others followed his lead, even Barnabas. How could this happen?

It's kind of like bullies coming into a schoolyard...

We all have different hats we wear in different situations – and that was true of Peter and Paul as well. Peter's ministry was primarily to the Jews and Paul's ministry was to the Gentiles, so they faced different challenges in their ministry, and perhaps they would have different perspectives on how to build community. We have that in our church communities today - in a different way, there are age groups, social groups, worship groups, leadership groups – each has a perspective on how to build community and it typically comes from their own experiences, or their own passions for ministry development, but still with a desire to build community for the whole.

For the Jewish people it would be a long struggle to regard the Gentiles, formerly considered ‘the straw to be burned’ or ‘the chafe to be scattered to the wind’, those they must neither give hospitality to nor receive it from, as people they could now break bread together with. The Judaizers they were called – those who accepted Christ as Messiah but held fast to the Jewish laws. Paul and Peter, both from a rich Jewish heritage, understood the Judaizers' point of view. However, being now a part of an even richer Christian heritage, Paul knows better (and thinks they may be pushing for ‘circumcision’ perhaps to avoid the persecution they are getting from the non-Christian Jews). Those were the ones Peter and Barnabas came up against – those are the ones who wanted to impose their laws of circumcision on the Gentiles and make them believe that without it they were not as good, ...not as saved....

But Paul had worked hard to lead the Galatians to the throne of Grace and he was not about to let Judaizers ruin their belief in Christ as their Saviour. Paul preached the Gospel of Grace, Justification by faith in Jesus Christ, not justification by keeping the Law. He knew first-hand the burden of the Law and he had been struck down in order to let that burden go and live by Faith in the Son of God.

What were Peter and Barnabas afraid of – declining enrollment in the Jewish churches??? ... changing their behavior by suddenly not sitting with Gentiles at meals - because 'certain people' are present, ... did it make the Gentiles wonder? Did they question Paul's theology? Did it make them wonder if the Grace of God was real? or did they have to do something more than have faith? When the truth of the Gospel is cast into doubt because the leaders behave as though one must earn their salvation through works or behavior or giving or.... - it breaks down the Christian Community. No wonder Paul is so angry.

We are all capable of acting in the same way that Peter did – the way that prompted Paul to openly scold him – I think the open scolding was good because it laid out the gospel in no uncertain terms for all present - you either live by faith in Christ or you live striving to do it yourself – the first leads to nurturing community, the second to destruction of the community –

What are the fears that haunt the church today, who are we afraid to sit beside? Do we believe we have to earn our salvation in any way?

Living by Faith in Christ takes the fear out of never doing enough, never having enough, never being enough, never giving enough. It takes effort to live by faith because we choose Grace – it takes effort and there may be times we are afraid of the repercussions from other people, but we will not live in the prison of trying to earn our way to salvation, or to 'fix' our broken selves.

It takes effort not to do things in order to get points – we cannot earn our way to heaven...

So does it matter what we do if we cannot earn our way to heaven? Absolutely!

First people hear what we believe in our statements of faith: are they ethical do they say we love God above all, we rely on Jesus Christ for our salvation, and the Holy Spirit lives in us. Is love the rule of life? Can they trust us?

Then people see our actions, our religious practices and if our religious practices demonstrate ethical and loving behaviours, if they line up with what we say, they can respect us.

When we demonstrated knowledge and competence in our statements of faith – in other words, we live what we believe, that belief becomes credible. But if we suddenly show behavior that calls into question our statement of faith, we lose credibility. ...and that is not good news for the Church.

So here was an important question that was asked: What does “Live by Faith” look like for us? I believe it begins with relationship to Christ – a prayer life that nurtures that relationship, and we all pray in many different ways – one way is not necessarily better than another; and we have the Scriptures to study – “...*a with God history...[which] traces the creation and formation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons with God himself at the centre of this community as its prime Sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.*”(255, *Life with God Bible*)

Perhaps we all need to answer that question as individuals in some way, God helping us, each day,

[we] live by faith in the Son of God,^[e] who loved [us] and gave himself for [us].(20). We were given grace, we cannot earn it...

We live by faith, choose Grace, because ... “*Some people will never come to church, listen to a minister, or read their Bible. They’re reading [our] lives and watching how [we] live. [Lets] be the light God called [us] to be!*”

As a church we also need to answer it as one body – so that the world may know.

As we continue to learn and understand, teach and strive to correct where necessary, we need to operate in the understanding of the greatest commandment to love God with every part of ourselves and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

All glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Focus Quote: *Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action.* Dallas Willard

Sources:

William Barclay. *Daily Study Bible (Rev. ed.), The Acts of the Apostles, and The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians (1976)*

<http://www.textweek.com>

The Bible (NRSV)(1989)

The Living with God Bible (NRSV)(2005)