

Paul takes a stand

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[0:00] Father, as we turn to this in some ways quite challenging passage of scripture, we pray that! we might find in it the words of truth and the words of life. We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

Amen. Yes, well as I perhaps indicated when we were dealing with Galatians and planning the autumn series, I think I slightly got the short story of getting Galatians 2. It's a difficult chapter in a difficult book in some ways.

As the Tyndale commentary says, Galatians challenges our everyday shallow acceptance and provokes our oppositions. But, well I'm not a sticker person, but I do have a sticker on my iPad. It's a quotation from Proverbs and it says, do not forsake wisdom.

And I think as I've looked at this passage, I've found that there is real wisdom to be found here. And I trust that by the help of the spirit of wisdom, I might be able to convey that to you today.

But the thing about wisdom is you do have to work at it a bit, so please be prepared to think a bit.

But surely what Paul does in chapter 2 can't be right, can it?

[1:40] Isn't he just fermenting discord and pushing his own line? Isn't it better just to do what apparently Peter and Barnabas were doing? Just live and let live and accommodate a bit of slack?

Can you imagine what the tabloid newspapers or the media streams would make of this passage, can't you?

Perhaps we could look at it as three headlines. First of all, the apostles fall out. That will be all over the internet in days, I should think, or hours.

And it's public. There's a public spat in Antioch. There's nothing like the news feeds like more than a scandal. And then all the details go viral.

We didn't have the internet in those days, but it certainly was written in this letter, and presumably in other news was passed around as well. So what should we make of this?

[2:48] When we see headlines like that, and we get them all the time nowadays, don't we? What should we do first? Well, the first thing, I guess, is to check the facts. Make sure that this really is what happened.

And then, once we've done that, to try and look a bit beyond that and say, what is really going on here? What is to be learned from this situation?

It's not a matter of blaming people or condemning people, which is what the news feeds like to do, of course. They want to find somebody to blame. But what we're seeking here, as I've said, is wisdom.

The wisdom of God himself. So let's try and unpack this text and examine the text to see what is really going on here. I've kept these headlines just to give us a bit of structure to our thought.

So first of all, the apostles fall out. So what are we to make of this? The first thing is to be absolutely clear about what is going on here.

[3:59] Galatians, as we've already seen in the first chapter, and Phil reminded us last week, is all about the doctrine of justification by faith alone. But it's important not to think that Peter and Barnabas disagreed with that doctrine.

The issue here is not really one of a doctrinal dispute. It's a case of where and if it is acceptable to downplay the doctrine a little and compromise for the sake of an apparent unity.

So to understand where Paul's coming from, he gives us some background. In chapter 1, verses 11 and 12, Paul has told us that he received his message directly from the Lord.

Yet that did not mean that it was, he did not consider it necessary to check with the other apostles. He tells us that he did in Galatians 2, verse 2. I went to Jerusalem in response to a revelation and meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders.

I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. Why did he do that? He said, well, I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain.

[5:19] He wanted to check that he was on message with the genuine gospel. And indeed, he received that very endorsement that he wanted. In chapter 2, verse 7, we read that the leaders recognised that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised.

So what is this visit that Paul talks about? We can't be absolutely certain, but it's probably what verses 1 to 10 refer to the story that we find in Acts 11, when a prophet named Agabus stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. This happened during the reign of Claudius. Disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

This would certainly explain the revelation of verse 2. It was the revelation to Agabus that there was going to be a famine. And also verse 11. But in any case, the particular issue here was whether the Gentile believers needed to be circumcised and follow other Jewish practices.

And of course the Jerusalem leaders, as we've seen, had indeed endorsed Paul's apostleship and message. Verse 9. And as we look at the book of Acts, and you have to really read Galatians in the context of Acts, it is important to remember that sometime before Paul's visit, it had been Peter himself who had first agreed to eat with the Gentile Cornelius and his household.

[7:13] And he'd done that in response to a vision from God, which we read about in Acts 10. This had already caused disquiet. So in Acts 11 we read that when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him and said, you went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.

This was certainly a contentious matter to the Jerusalem believers. In fact, so much so that a major conference would be needed to discuss it.

We read of that in Acts 15. But back in Acts 11, a young church had been established in Antioch. And Barnabas was sent there to encourage and establish that work.

And in fact, it was Barnabas himself who had recruited Saul, as he was then called, to the task in Acts 11.25. What we don't read of in Acts, but must be true, from Galatians 2.11, was that Peter himself must have made an extended visit to Antioch.

And as 12a tells us, as he had done at the house of Cornelius, he happily ate and shared fellowship with the Gentile believers. But then some more visitors turned up.

[8:39] They claimed to have been sent by James, who's James, well, James was the Lord's brother and was the de facto leader of the Jerusalem church, as we learn from Acts 21.8.

And indeed, Acts 15. James himself would actually later deny that he sent these men. Acts 15.24. But Peter seems to have either accepted the claim of these visitors or decided not to argue the point.

And Barnabas and the other Jews followed Peter's lead. And this was the point at which Paul cried, foul. This is wrong. So let's repeat, the issue here is not that Paul, Peter and Paul disagreed on doctrine.

The problem was that Peter had decided to avoid offending the Jews by offending the Jews by breaking fellowship with the Gentile believers.

One thing our English translations don't bring out, actually, is that in verse 13, you'll see in our translation in verse 13, the word hypocrisy occurs twice.

[9:54] Actually, these are two different Greek words that are used here. The second word hypocrisy is the one from which our English word comes.

And the word literally means play-acting, pretending to be an actor. But the first word translated to hypocrisy in verse 13 actually has a slightly different meaning.

It means to dissemble, dissembling. What's dissembling? Well, it's hiding what you really think for the sake of peace.

How many academics in our universities have been forced to do that of late? Of course, they'll get cancelled if they don't or removed from their position.

Dissembling is never a good thing. We need to be clear about what we really think. Peter and Barnabas were keeping quiet about what they really believed for the sake of avoiding a spat.

[11:09] And we can sympathise with that, can't we? No one wants to appear to be divisive. In fact, churches have often come up with compromises and forms of words acceptable to both sides.

As an independent, I view with amazement the discussions that the Anglican churches are having over gay marriage and the like. The contortions and forms of words they try and get everybody to agree with.

And of course, Paul himself advocates tolerance on minor cultural practices as in Romans 14. But when it comes to key gospel issues, frankly, such compromises never work.

They simply leave everyone feeling dissatisfied. And as Paul goes on to argue, this certainly is a crucial matter here.

And so that brings us to our second shock. Sorry, it's too far. We read in chapter 2, verse 11, that Paul opposed Peter in public.

[12:26] And that really does seem quite shocking. Wouldn't a private word have suffice? After all, that's what Paul himself had done in verse 2.

And as we've said, there's nothing wrong with cultural accommodation. Indeed, the conclusions that the Jerusalem synod in Acts 15 would reach were to some extent cultural accommodation.

Gentiles should change their behavior so as not to upset the Jews, and the Jews should change their behavior so as not to upset the Gentiles. Indeed, Paul himself accommodates Jewish scruples here in Acts 21, verses 17 to 26, when he goes to Jerusalem.

He's happy to go through the rituals that are required to go to the temple. people. So is Paul failing to take his own advice in Galatians?

Why does he insist on going public with this? And the answer we find in chapter 2, verse 14. Paul had spotted what Peter had not.

[13:37] The very gospel itself was being undermined by this behavior. Why is that? Well, it's always been possible, it always was possible, wasn't it, for Gentiles to join themselves to the covenant by becoming Jews.

There are certainly Old Testament examples. You think of Rahab from Jericho, Ruth, who was a Moabitess, or Uriah the Hittite, the husband of Bathsheba.

If the gospel to the Gentiles was just calling them to become Jews and to keep the Jewish law, then why did Jesus come at all?

More specifically, and this is the crucial question, what exactly did the death and resurrection of Jesus achieve? That's the crucial issue.

And it's about, as we've said, about justification, being declared innocent or righteous before God. And the problem, of course, is that no one can be declared righteous by keeping God's law.

[14:53] Why? Because no one has kept it. Not Rahab, not Ruth, not Uriah, not Abraham, or Jacob, or Moses, or David, for that matter, not Peter, or Paul, or Barnabas.

There's only one exception, that's Jesus. Jesus kept the law perfectly, and yet he died in our place. So Paul argues here, 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.

And in the next verse, therefore, I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing. Actually, the detailed argument is quite dense and continues into chapter three, so I'm not going to go into too much detail here about exactly how this doctrine of justification by faith works, because that will be the subject for next week, and indeed most of the rest of the epistle.

But we do need to keep in mind the question, why did Christ die? And why can nobody be justified by the law?

[16:27] And that's why Paul went public, because public clarity over the gospel is vital. And that brings us indeed to the third shock here.

The details go viral as we might say. The confrontation between Peter and Paul, which we've read about, took place in Antioch and in Galatia.

Wouldn't it have been better to keep it quiet? There's a proverb in English that says, don't wash your dirty linen in public. There's something to be said for that.

So why does Paul make such a fuss here? And notice he's doing it not before the trusted conclave of elders, like in Acts 15. He's doing it to a group, a bunch of people that Paul himself describes as foolish, bewitched, and turning to a different gospel.

We didn't read chapter three, verse one, but that's where it starts. He says, you foolish Galatians. He's not regarding the Galatians as those who are wise and can process this.

[17:52] He's saying, you've got to understand this because what you're doing doesn't make sense. Of course, that's just the point.

We say that people that forget their history are condemned to repeat it. Old heresies reappear, just get tarted up with fresh clothes and makeup.

Gnosticism becomes woke post-modernism. You can think of other examples, but I won't pause here. But the wolves are just as adapted imitating sheep as they were 2,000 years ago.

In fact, we could probably say they've improved with practice. What do they say? We say we must be culturally relevant and tolerant.

We must welcome new insights. We mustn't exclude different lifestyles. Well, actually, of course, all these things are true. But like the serpent's words in Genesis 3, half-truths are used to sell the big lie.

[19:08] The grace of God is denied and the death of Christ is emptied of its power. That's why Paul said this to the Galatians.

You've got to grasp this. You've got to think clearly or the cross of Christ is emptied of its power. So let's see if we can look beneath the surface a bit and see what is really going on here.

And the first point to make is that it's not that the law is abolished, but that it's being misused.

There's an important verse here, which is Matthew 5, 17 to 20.

You might like to turn it up. So I put Mark on the slide. I beg your pardon.

It's of course Matthew 5, 17 to 20. In the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus himself said this, Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.

[20:21] I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfil them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished.

Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commandments and teaches other accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

That seems clear enough. Then Jesus turns this teaching on its head because who were the ones who taught the Jewish law? They were the scribes and the Pharisees.

Jesus then said, I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

sin. The law of God has not been set aside. How can it be? If the law of the Medes and Persians cannot be changed, how much more the law of the eternal father?

[21:32] Nothing can disappear from the law, because these are the words of God. And what did the law say? Well, the particular matter of controversy here, of course, was circumcision.

circumcision, what was it? It was a sign of being born into the covenant people. And the word, I think, literally means something like cutting off.

It was cutting off symbolically the inherited curse of Adam. But do we need to be circumcised as Christians?

Well, absolutely we do. The word of God cannot be set aside. Not just the men either. The thing about circumcision, of course, is only applied to men. Women need to be circumcised too.

But this is not the circumcision carried out by a surgeon. It's a work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. The cutting off of the curse of Adam in the heart.

[22:40] There's not anything a human surgeon can do. Only the Spirit can do that. Is it necessary to be born as a child of Abraham to be justified?

Absolutely it is. Jesus taught that you must be reborn. But how does that happen? Well, in Psalm 87 we read this.

I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me. Philistia 2 and Tyre along with Cush. Those are all the Jews' traditional enemies, of course.

Philistia 2 and Tyre along with Cush. And we'll say, this one was born in Zion. Indeed of Zion it will be said, this one and that one were born in her.

And the Most High himself will establish her. The Lord will write in the register of the people, this one was born in Zion. It's not a human record of birth that matters.

[23:51] But the Lord himself records in the record of the people, this one was born in Zion. Of course most of the Jews in the Roman Empire were not literally born in Zion, in Jerusalem.

Peter was a Galilean, Paul himself was not even born in Judea. In fact Paul was actually a Roman citizen but he wasn't born in Rome anyway, either.

In fact we get the impression that although he was a Roman citizen until he was arrested he'd never actually been to Rome. Citizenship and the right to live in a human nation are things we get very tangled up over nowadays aren't they?

And it's complicated and we see that every day in the news. But where you were born physically is not really relevant to being a citizen of Zion.

Who your physical ancestors were is not the question here. What is required is spiritual birth by the Holy Spirit and then the Lord will write in his register born in Zion.

[25:04] But there's more to be said because the law demands a penalty. In fact the law demands a death penalty. And that is why Christ died.

So we read in chapter 2 verse 16 we 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.

We are saved because we are buried with Christ and the death penalty that applied to us has been applied to him instead. That is the fulfillment of the law.

law. So that's why Paul argues in chapter 2 verse 18 if I rebuild what I destroyed then I really would be a lawbreaker.

[26:09] I really like the NIV translation here, the new NIV, the older one says something I will prove I'm a lawbreaker or something but I think this translation is better.

If I rebuild what I destroyed then I really would be a lawbreaker. I would be breaking the law of God. That's what Paul is saying. By going back to that which can't really save, trusting in your ancestry from Abraham or trusting in the right of circumcision, you're really breaking the law.

And that's why Paul regarded this as so important. He made such a fuss over it. So let's have some concluding thoughts on this. compromise for the sake of peace must not compromise the gospel.

Our message is not try and be a better person. It's said that when the Methodist missionary, when John Wesley and the others went to, first went to North America and preached to the Native Americans, that basically his gospel was simply you need to be a better person.

Well, they knew that already. It didn't really help them very much. much. But the gospel is still what it always was.

[27:46] Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near. Like those Galatians, everyone needs to be perfectly clear on that. Cultural sensitivity can be a good thing.

God's name. It's not, I've forgotten the guy's name now, the Chinese missionary anyway, who would dress in Chinese, what's his name? Hudson Taylor, that's it, yeah.

Who would dress in Chinese dress for the sake of cultural sensitivity. That's good. But he didn't compromise the gospel. He didn't remove the offence of the message, which is still that the curse is enforced if you do not turn to Christ.

So what lessons can we take from this chapter? Well, the first thing is that doctrine matters. Some argue that doctrine divides and we should just be inclusive and accept any teaching that's around and seems popular.

This is just a recipe for confusion. It's been said many times that we live in a post-truth society. Each has their own opinion.

[29:04] All this is claimed equally valid. Of course, they can't all be equally valid because they all contradict each other. And what's the result?

The result is chaos we see all around us. Chaos on the streets, chaos online, chaos in the news, chaos in politics as our old well-established two-party system begins to unravel.

Truth matters. And if everyone has their own opinion, how do we settle debates?

Well, it's no good arguing. Debates are settled by cancel culture, or by the most effective protest on the street, the one who can raise the most protesters and wave the most flags.

And if all else fails, resort to the assassin's bullet. How does Paul himself describe this behaviour?

[30:18] Ephesians 4, 14, he describes it as being infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, blown here and there by every wind of teaching, and the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.

Amen. Amen. Amen. And another lesson here, I think, is think for yourselves.

We expect the under shepherds, the elders and the teachers, in this church and in others, to guard against the wolves. That's their job, as Paul tells them in Acts 20, isn't it?

The job is to guard against the wolves. But they're not infallible. None of us is infallible. For that reason, it's important that issues are discussed publicly and transparently, so that everyone understands, everyone is convinced in their own mind, as Paul says.

If you abandon transparency, you've taken the first step, becoming a cult. Once a teacher starts saying, believe this because I tell you, you've taken the first step down a very dangerous path.

[31:50] So how should we act as teachers then? Well, Paul is clear again in 2 Corinthians 5, 11. He said, since then, we know what it is to fear the Lord.

We try to persuade others. What we are is plain to God. I hope it is also plain to your conscience. I hope those of us who stand up and teach from this stage can say that what we are is plain to God and I hope it is also plain to your conscience.

When I was wondering how to close this sermon, I thought what would be a suitable hymn to sing. My thoughts turned to a song I haven't sung for years, not even the sort of song I normally go for. It's a song in fact in the old American revivalist tradition. But it really sums up what Paul is saying here. He's saying that there is power, there is wonder-working power in the precious blood of the Lamb.

So let's sing that together and sing it in the spirit it was written. Feel free to clap or make any noise that you like. It's a great hymn, even if not the sort of hymn that we normally sing.

[33:10] There is indeed power in the precious blood of the Lamb.