

Demonstrating and Defining the Gospel

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- [0 : 0 0] One of the things I'm sort of really bad at is to tell a story straight. That is, in a way that allows someone to know the order of the events.
- So Mark, how was your holiday in Sydney? Oh great, I say. The highlight was visiting the Sydney Opera House. Perfect weather that day. Took some great photos. Much better than our Harbour Bridge photos.
- Because although we walking the bridge was a highlight, which we did after church the day before we came home. Actually, the best views of both the bridge and the Opera House was when we came back on the ferry from Manly.
- Those photos were magnificent. Now, anyone listening to me by now would be confused, I think. So when did he visit the Opera House? Was it before or after the ferry trip to Manly?
- Was that after the Harbour Bridge walk? All in the same day or separate? Any ideas? I can't even remember.
- [1 : 0 2] Well, I don't want to tie up Paul with the same brush. But I think reading Galatians, I do feel a little confused myself reading the first couple of chapters.
- There are multiple visits to Jerusalem. Various run-ins with false preachers. Are these the same people? How did they all occur? When? In what order?
- It's not quite so clear, is it? Unless you sit down and work it out properly. Well, I'm going to begin today with a timeline, which hopefully will help us to understand this. So last week, we read of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus.
- And immediately, verse 17 of chapter 1, he goes to Arabia and Damascus. Three years later, verse 18, he visits Peter and James in Jerusalem for 15 days.
- So that's the second thing on the timeline there. And then 14 years after that, he returns to Jerusalem. This time to have his ministry recognized by the apostles.
- [2 : 0 1] Now, why did he do that? Because verse 4 of chapter 2, some false believers had infiltrated their ranks to rob the Gentiles of their freedom in the gospel.
- But then false believers also came to Galatians. Which prompts Paul to write Galatians. But now, here, Paul recounts an earlier incident in verses 11 and 13, which takes place when Peter visits Antioch.
- But he is influenced by certain men from James. All right. There's actually another event in Acts, chapter 15, the council in Jerusalem. And that also is not clear when that happens.
- We think, or some scholars think, it's after the writing of Galatians. But it doesn't really impact us for tonight. Now, if you're wondering where Antioch is, it's actually further north of Damascus.
- We had this slide from last week. Antioch was the city that actually Barnabas took Paul to, and which therefore served as his base. It's the place where Christians, or this first city where the believers were first called Christians.

[3 : 15] So, in verse 11, we read that when Cephas, or Peter as is more commonly known, came to Antioch, this city, I opposed him, I, Paul, opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.

For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles, because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.

The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy, even Barnabas was led astray. So, in verse 9 of last week, having extended his hand of partnership, of fellowship, to Paul and Barnabas, Peter at first eats freely in Antioch with the Gentiles as fellow Christians.

It's not clear if Paul was there at this time, but at some point, Paul goes away from Antioch, and some men from James come to the city. And now, it would seem, though, that these men from James are probably not the same group of people as those who belong to the circumcision group in that same verse.

Rather, these men from James were actually Christians that were concerned that Peter's eating with the Gentiles was undermining witness to the Jews in Jerusalem.

[4 : 34] You see, the Gentiles weren't circumcised, nor did they observe Jewish law, including the food laws. And those of the circumcision group in Jerusalem were Jews, but probably not Christians.

They were using what Peter was doing in Antioch to dissuade Jews from becoming Christians. Maybe saying things like, Jesus can't be the Messiah, because he's causing people to stop obeying the law.

If you believe in Jesus, you don't have to obey the law. So, Jesus can't really be the Messiah. So convincing were they that Peter and others, including Barnabas, were persuaded and led astray.

Of course, when Paul returns, he opposes Peter publicly, because he knew that the truth of the gospel was at stake. Peter may have not said as much with his words, but by his actions, he was denying the truth of the gospel.

That's why Paul called their actions as hypocrisy. In fact, he said that Peter stood condemned. That's how strong his language were.

[5 : 42] Now, in verses 14, Paul goes on to say, When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, he confronts Peter in front of them all and says, 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? Peter was happy to eat freely with the Gentiles, to live like them when there was no pressure.

But now, in order to please these men from James, he and the others with him were withdrawing from table fellowship with the Gentiles. And in so doing, they were sending the signal or a signal to them, to the Gentiles, that if they wanted to fellowship with us, the Jews, then they needed to obey the Jewish laws in order to do that.

And this was the very thing that the Jews themselves didn't need to do. It all seemed rather straightforward last week, didn't it, when Paul and Peter shook hands in Jerusalem.

They had each their separate mission field. Paul to the Gentiles and Peter to the Jews. And they could minister as appropriate to each culture. But now, in Antioch, when both Jews and Gentiles were living together, what were they to do?

[7 : 00] Is it okay to be Christians but remain separate? What did the gospel demand? Well, Paul saw that fellowship between the Jews and the Gentiles was actually vital to the witness of the gospel.

To him, Jews living separately to Gentiles undermined the unity that they shared in Christ. And this, after all, was the vision that we find in the Old Testament, the Jewish scriptures.

From Genesis to Malachi, God's promise was that his Messiah wouldn't simply restore Israel back to God, but would gather all Gentiles and nations to him as well.

In other words, all humanity will be united under God in his kingdom. And if you read the second half of Isaiah, from chapter 40 onwards, this is the picture that you get over and over.

I've simply chosen one passage from Isaiah 55 for our reading today. There in verse 1, The offer is of God's blessing. It's given free of charge, without payment or work.

[8 : 08] This was a gift of grace from God. Come, eat, drink without money and without cost. This is all you can eat. No charge, no time limit.

But as we read a few verses on, we find that this offer isn't just for Jews, but for all nations, including Gentiles.

There's a vision of nations running to Jerusalem for this blessing, because of the Lord. And the rest of Isaiah paints this very same picture. People of all types, from all nations, streaming to the light of Jerusalem.

It's actually quite moving when I read it, and I encourage you to go and read it for yourself. It's a wonderful picture of global harmony and peace. Whether Greek or Jew, slave or free, kings or subjects, young or old, all come together in this wonderful community under God.

Now, of course, we see how this vision is fulfilled in the New Testament, that only in Jesus and through His death is this possible. So Paul, in Ephesians chapter 2, explains this very point to us, which I've got on the slide.

[9 : 20] He says that Jesus is our peace, who has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles, thereby creating in Himself one new humanity out of the two.

By His death, He sets aside or abolishes the law, the very thing Peter was trying to reinstate for the Gentiles, so that there can be one new humanity.

And how is this all achieved? Well, not by our obedience to the law, but by His death on the cross, in which we place our trust and faith.

Friends, I know that here today in Melbourne, the division is no longer between Jews and Gentiles. I may be wrong, but I haven't heard of any church say that you have to follow Jewish laws in order to be safe.

And yet, I think we can still create barriers that divide the united body of Christ, this new humanity. For example, I remember when I first joined an Anglican church, how I was made to actually feel like I didn't belong because I wasn't Anglican enough.

[10 : 33] Now, it wasn't explicit or intentional, but they would joke about what it meant to be a good Anglican, which was taken to mean that you had to pray or speak in a certain way which reflected Anglican tradition.

Likewise, I know a friend who is a pastor at church where a large number, perhaps even up to half of the members, actually belong to the same extended family. And again, it's not intentional, but during morning tea after church, these same family members would congregate or click together and make it hard for new people to connect with them.

Now, in both cases, I'm pretty sure if you asked them, they would say explicitly that, you know, in order to belong, all you needed was faith in Christ. And yet, sometimes, actions speak louder than words, just like with Peter.

And so, brothers and sisters, I want us to be careful then not to let our actions, whether intentional or not, build up invisible barriers which Christ has already torn down.

Rather, we must live in line with the gospel. I know that we all believe here that it's the gospel that unites us, that we all belong because of our faith in Jesus.

[11 : 56] And so, that means actually fighting against our natural tendency to build walls, to group together based on race or culture or age or educational level or the kind of job we have or special interests, whatever.

God's vision for church is that we all live together in unity, form deep bonds that cross across these social markers, not live in little cliques or silos.

And I know many of us actually do this. We go out our way to break down these barriers. We even have to, we even get out of our comfort zone in order to do this.

And so, I really, there's a real, real great blessing and I thank God for that. And yet, I do still hear from time to time in this congregation that people say they don't feel like they belong.

So, that tells me that we're not quite there yet, are we? So, let me encourage you then, if you're feeling comfortable in this congregation, then it's likely you need to be looking out for people who don't.

[13 : 05] Don't be so caught up with your own close friends that you can't see others in need, needing to be included. Conversely, if you're feeling left out, well, I think you have a part to play as well.

And I want to encourage you to look beyond these outer differences and see how you're actually united with your brothers and sisters at a much deeper level.

Because it's the blood of Christ that unites us. And all of us, I think, need to realize that at some level, church isn't really meant to be comfortable.

Because God is bringing together people that, if not for Jesus, wouldn't probably hang out with each other. And yet, this is God's vision for church.

This is the unity that brings glory to what Christ has done for us. Well, Peter may have denied the gospel by his actions, but now Paul, in the remaining verses, sets out to defend the gospel by spelling out its logic.

[14 : 09] It's only a summary because he will elaborate on this in the rest of the letter. So we're going to just look at this briefly tonight and then go deeper in the coming weeks. Now, as you can see from my outline, I've summarized Paul's logic under four points.

First, in verse 15, Paul says, we who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Christ Jesus.

So we too have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

Paul's point here is that no one, whether Jew or Gentile, is justified, that is, made right before God by obeying the law or the works of the law.

Only faith in Jesus saves. Now, Paul presumes that Peter and the other Jews know this already. He's using their language, calling Gentiles sinful because that's how Jews saw anyone who didn't follow the law.

[15 : 14] But as Christians now, these Jews also knew that they can't be justified this way. They knew that only by faith in Jesus will they be made right before God.

So Paul then turns everything on its head in verse 17. He says, but if in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin?

Absolutely not. It may look like Christ is promoting sin because he frees Jews from having to obey the law. So you don't have to obey the law, therefore you are a lawbreaker or sinner.

But actually, he's turned it around and said, it's the one who tries to reinstate the law that's the true lawbreaker. So he goes on to say, if I rebuild what I destroyed, what I really would be, then what I really would be is a lawbreaker.

Why? Because it's against God's will. God's will is that we're saved by faith. And so if you think now that you need to obey the law as a Christian, then ironically, that makes you a lawbreaker because it's going against God's will.

[16 : 27] And so as far as the Christian is concerned, the law is now dead, whether you're a Jew or Gentile. We have no further obligation as Christians to the law.

And that brings us to the third point in Paul's logic. Christ's death has freed us from the law so that we live for God through His resurrected life. He spells this out in verses 19 and 20.

For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 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.

Metaphorically speaking, when we put our faith in Christ's death, we too have been crucified with Christ. We no longer live. And yet, we're still breathing and living in our bodies.

Well, Paul explains that that's not you. but Christ who lives in you. Jesus, the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself for us by dying for us also gives Himself to us by living in us.

[17 : 42] And so, our motivation in life is actually totally different. We don't do what's right in order to be justified. No, we do what's right because we're already justified.

We're already justified and therefore Christ lives in us and He enables us to do what's right. He prompts us, He motivates us to do what's right. So, doing good, obeying the law, good works, however you call it, all of this isn't to make us right before God or even to continue to be making us right in God's eyes.

It's a response of a life of faith in Jesus. That's why we do right. It's in response to our faith in Jesus. For if we're still trying to be righteous by obeying the law, then Paul now concludes in verse 21 with the fourth point, Christ died for nothing.

Do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing. Like last week and the week before, Paul is determined to safeguard the grace of God.

Nothing must be said or done to undermine it because it lies at the heart of the gospel. The moment we or anyone add to faith in Jesus as the basis for righteousness, even if it's just implicitly like Peter did with his actions, then Christ has died for nothing.

[19 : 17] If we say obeying the law is also necessary or doing good works is necessary or following some ritual is necessary, then we take away from the sufficiency of Christ's death.

we're saying that Jesus is not enough. But there is no in-between. Either Christ's death is everything we need or it's nothing at all.

Because if his death isn't sufficient, then he's less than God's son. And God himself can't be all-powerful. He can't truly be God. So can you see where Peter's actions leads in the end?

Not eating with the Gentiles, it might seem innocuous, but it ultimately undermines not just the gospel, but the grace of God and even God's very own character.

So a seemingly pragmatic decision to appease the Jews in order that more people might believe, let's say, ends up having this, you know, such huge ramifications for which Paul says Peter stands condemned.

[20 : 26] Well, friends, we're going to look more closely at all of this in the coming weeks. And I want to say right up that I actually make no apologies to say that this means that we will hear more about the gospel.

There will be more emphasis on the grace of God. There will be more emphasis on faith in Christ. And I guess the question may come up in some of your minds. Can we have too much gospel?

Can we so emphasize grace and faith that, for example, we neglect good works? Well, hopefully from tonight's passage, you've seen how the gospel actually has implications for life.

Paul's criticism of Peter was that he was not acting in line with the gospel. Hopefully, you've seen too how true faith actually results in Christ living in us so that we live for God.

So true faith must lead to a changed and godly life. But as I look at history and churches and society, I also see what happens when we don't emphasize the gospel and we neglect faith in Jesus by God's grace or we add or subtract from the gospel.

[21 : 41] Just look at that timeline again. It's not much more than 20 years, is it? I don't think. And yet, we've already seen in these 20 years three separate occasions in which false gospels have already arisen to sway believers in Jerusalem, in Antioch, in Galatia.

And if you look back over history, the main reason we needed the Reformation 500 years ago was because the Roman Catholic Church had abandoned the doctrine and practice of faith in Jesus alone.

You know, there were good works, indulgences, all other things that were being added so that Christ's death, it seems, was for nothing. And since then, if you look at the history of the Protestant Church, well, time and time again we see ritual or good works become the focus instead of the gospel of Jesus.

You know, many of the universities and some of these best private schools that you see nowadays in the US or the UK or even here in Australia, they all used to be places where the true gospel was taught and true Christians were made of students.

But now, if you go there, the kind of Christianity that's taught by most of them is that it's the kind of which it's all about being good, isn't it?

[22 : 58] It's all about what Jesus would have done with nothing said about needing to believe in what Jesus did on the cross for them. And sadly, I think if you go to many churches today, that's the emphasis as well.

I mean, we may even sing songs or hymns that are gospel-focused. We may still read the Bible. We may still say the creeds. But frankly, the gospel isn't preached.

And if I look at my own life as well, that's also my tendency as well. You know, the day I was ordained, somehow I felt I was more deserving as a Christian.

How foolish of me. When someone compliments me about how great my daughters are, how well behaved, well, that's because I've been a good Christian, good parent. Every good thing I've done somehow gets added to my achievement list, doesn't it?

It makes me think somehow that I deserve to be a Christian. You see, when we see behavior that's not in line with the gospel, like Peter's, it's pretty easy to call it out, isn't it?

[24 : 03] Wrong behavior equals wrong understanding of gospel. But when we see right and good behavior, it can still hide false belief, can't it?

one person can preach the gospel in response to his faith in Jesus, but another preaches to show how good a disciple he is.

Well, one is a true believer and the other is a false believer, even though he may be preaching what is true. So that's why we need to keep coming back to the gospel, to keep reminding ourselves that we are saved by God's grace, that there is no righteousness apart from faith in Jesus.

Because if we start to think and believe otherwise, then what's the end conclusion in verse 21? Christ died for nothing. We need to keep believing the gospel and then live it out and then let our actions be in line with the gospel.

Let's pray. Father, forgive us for the tendency that we have to add to faith our own works and merit. Keep us, keep showing us that although we are undeserving, Christ loved us and gave himself for us.

[25 : 19] Help us to act and live in line with this truth and to live by faith in him. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.