

The Gospel Truth

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[0 : 00] If you would like to take your Bibles out and open to page 177 near the back and follow on, we're going to be looking at Galatians chapter 2, which Nora just read for us.

One of the most wonderful things about sharing in a baptism service together is that it's a very powerful reminder to us that who we are does not come from our financial status or our asset portfolio or our education or our performance or our success or our failure or how big our lungs are. But our lives are determined by what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. This is very important. That who we are as individuals and who we are as a congregation is not dependent on our finances and our fashions, but on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

And I want to show you this. If you look down in Galatians 2, at verse 20, the Apostle Paul says, I have been crucified with Christ.

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And by life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

[1 : 31] They are astounding words. And they say to us that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, his death on the cross, is not a theoretical event that happened all the way back there in history, but is the place where your life and my life are changed irrevocably forever.

Where through faith in Jesus Christ, we ourselves are crucified with him and that the life we now lead is a new life living to God. That is who we are.

And what the passage does is it lays out before us two ways of living or two identities. They're strongly contrasted.

And every single one of us struggle to live in one way and end up living the other way. It's either we choose to live out of fear or we choose to live out of love.

And I want to show you how this works. Let's have a look. Firstly, we are not who we are. Because of fear. And if you look at verses 11 and 12, we meet Cephas, that's the Apostle Peter, one of the most prominent of the Apostles of Jesus Christ, who had walked with Jesus through his ministry.

[2 : 47] And both the Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter, and the Apostle Peter are honoured leaders in the same church. They're both committed to the same gospel.

And what is very, somewhat encouraging to us is that in these words, we see the Apostle Peter, a great leader in the church, letting the side down, living, making a decision, not based on conviction, but playing the role of a hypocrite.

If you look at verse 11, it reports a dramatic conflict between the Apostle Peter and the Apostle Paul. And it took place in Antioch. Antioch was a fantastic church.

It was the first church where a large group of Gentiles had come to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. You know, of course, that all Jesus' early disciples were Jews.

They were true blue Jews. It was not easy for them to accept how radical the grace of God was in the death of Jesus Christ. That God accepts us now entirely irrelevant of racial, moral, national distinction, but through faith in His Son.

[4 : 03] And in the early days of Christianity, God gave to the Apostle Peter the same vision three times before Peter could understand that you don't have to become a Jew to be saved through Jesus Christ.

So Peter then travels up to Antioch to this wonderful church, a multiracial, multi-ethnic demonstration of the unity of God's people. And what a congregation it must have been.

I mean, there were Gentiles there and there were Jews there. There were Africans there. There were Asians there. All enjoying table fellowship together because of the grace of God.

And I think Peter would have had a ball. He went into the church and he would have received invitations from Africans and Asians and from everyone who was part of that congregation. And he

probably tasted meals that he had never tasted before.

And he wasn't worried about whether the food was kosher because he was living out the demonstration that God accepts us all by faith in Jesus Christ. But an influential group comes up from Jerusalem, from head office, a Jewish Christian delegation.

[5 : 09] And they bring with them a two-tier faith system. They say, look, it's all very well for you to have faith in Jesus Christ and that's a very good thing. But if you really want to be saved, you need to add to that full obedience to the law, full obedience to the Jewish law.

And it's very interesting if you read the effect that it had on Peter. You see in verse 12, before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles.

But when they came, he drew back and separated himself. Why? Fearing the circumcision party. You see, it's not a carefully thought through decision based on conviction.

He's afraid. He's afraid of what an important group of people will think of him. He doesn't stand and say, listen, you know the gospel that we have come to believe that we are saved through Jesus Christ.

Well, I'm rethinking that. He doesn't say that. Under pressure from important people, Peter changes quietly and gradually and unobtrusively.

[6 : 17] And you can imagine how it happens, can't you? He's invited to another meal at a Gentile house and he politely makes an excuse not to go. I've got to go and I've got to have a meal with my Jewish brothers.

And I think this is the pressure that has always been on God's people. The pressure on us in the first instance is not to stand up and openly deny the gospel.

The pressure is just to not practice it. And we have all got influential people in our lives who we'd get on much better with if we would just compromise the practice of the gospel on the edges.

You know, I don't think people care what we believe so long as our behavior fulfills others' expectations for us. So long as we do things in a way that will gain their approval.

So it's very difficult not to be embarrassed of the clear words of Jesus Christ. Someone might call you a born-again Christian or horror of horrors, a fundamentalist.

[7 : 17] But as soon as we are more influenced by these subtle prejudices or by cultural acceptance, we become hypocrites. And when a Christian falls into hypocrisy, when a Christian fails to practice the gospel, it creates a flow-on effect.

Look at verse 13. And with Peter, the rest of the Jews acted, literally, with hypocrisy. So that even Barnabas, Barnabas, the great man of encouragement, was carried away by their hypocrisy. Nothing more contagious than hypocrisy. It's a good thing to want the approval of other people. It's very natural. When a powerful group from head office is behind it, it's difficult to have the courage of your own convictions.

That is what pressure groups are for. Pressure groups make us take our focus off the truth of an issue so that we might submit to their pressure. Peter would have never separated himself from Gentile fellowship if he wasn't looking over his shoulder if he wasn't looking for approval from other people.

And the apostle Paul takes the most dramatic step that he can and in front of everyone he rebukes him. See verse 14? When I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, etc.

[8 : 40] Now this is an astounding thing to do. I said in the earlier service it would be like me standing Dan up and pointing out his hypocrisy, which I'm very tempted to do.

There's only one weakness in that and that is he would point out mine. And we'd be here for a very long time after that. See, there's a lot of good reasons for Paul not to do this publicly, don't you think?

I mean, Paul hates conflict. Here is the man who maintains unity of the spirit with a bond of peace through tears. And yet Peter needs to be rebuked openly.

Wouldn't it have been much easier for Paul to have listened to those who say, look, don't rock the boat. Would it have been easier for Paul to have listened to the modern theologians who have said to him, it's okay to have different gospels, diversity is the most important thing we need to have in our church.

But you see, what Paul can see, which is very important for us to see, is that what is at stake here is the truth of the gospel. And the truth of the gospel is more important than your ego or my ego.

[9 : 47] The truth of the gospel is more important than the apostles. And that leads us to the second side of this. What does it mean to live a life because of love?

And so what is this gospel that we've been talking about? Finally, in verses 15 to 20, we come to the heart of the Christian message and it is one word, it is justification.

Look at verse 16 for a moment. We know that a man is justified, a man, a woman, is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.

Even we have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law. And just in case we didn't get it for the first two times, because by works of the law shall no one be justified.

Justification, says the apostle, is what life is all about. It doesn't matter whether you believe in God or not. We are all trying to justify ourselves. We do it by our accumulation of wealth.

[10 : 50] We do it by our education and by our social status and by our taste and fashion and superiority, by our moral integrity. And we try and build up an image of ourselves for one purpose, to justify ourselves so that we might be able to look down on other people around us.

And there is a supremely religious way of doing it for us in church where we observe the rules and we honour our parents. We do the church thing and we contribute to charity. We try not to tell lies. But again, we are trying to create a picture of ourselves where we look down on others. We are justifying and we look down on those who are trying to justify themselves by other means that we look down on. And that's what the people who came up from Jerusalem to Antioch were doing. You see, the laws of God in the Old Testament were like a railroad track along which God's people were meant to move in their obedience. But what the Pharisees had done and what this group from Jerusalem had done is they had torn up the track and they had put it on its end and they had created a ladder where they felt that if they could just obey all the rules they would climb all the way up to God in heaven.

And Paul says, you can't do it. We're justified not by works but by faith in Jesus Christ. Because justification is about what God thinks about us.

[12 : 11] It's about the fact that we cannot prove ourselves. And when the world comes to us and says to you, you're a sinful person, to a Christian, we already know that. God has sent us and out of his sheer love and his grace God has sent his son and his son lived for us and in his death on the cross, here is the amazing thing, the verdict of the last day has been announced.

Everyone who has faith in Jesus Christ has been pronounced not just not guilty but righteous. This is one of the miracles of the gospel proclamation that if we run until the end of the world, on the day when the Lord Jesus comes again, all those who trust in his death and resurrection that the verdict on that day will be innocent, righteous, not guilty, justified.

That is why the preaching, that's why the Christian gospel is opposed both to immorality as well as to morality. I am acceptable to God not because I sin nor because I do good.

I'm acceptable to God because Jesus Christ died on the cross. I'm not approved by God because I obey. I obey because I am already accepted by him through Jesus Christ.

It's very important. So our fundamental understanding of ourselves does not come from our approval. My understanding of myself cannot come from your approval or disapproval of me.

[13 : 41] No matter how important and beautiful and influential you are, it can only come from God himself. You see, if I set my own standards and I live up to them, I'm either going to be arrogant and look down on you or I'm going to be in complete despair as I continually fail.

But justification by faith in Jesus Christ means this. In myself, I know I am always a sinful person and in Christ Jesus I know I am always justified, I am always righteous.

so the Christian person can be bold and humble at the same time. It's a wonderful and strange combination. And when we act out of fear and insecurity as Peter did, we're trying to build up that tower of our achievements again.

But our justification will not come that way. It does not come through works. It doesn't come through baptism. It comes from one place. It comes from that radical acceptance of each of us that God has given us in the death of Jesus of his son.

Everything that stood between you and me and God in the cross of Jesus Christ has been obliterated. Every disobedience, every guilty thing I've ever done, it has been taken away and in its place God looks at me as righteous.

[15 : 05] God gives to me the righteousness of Jesus Christ. It's an astounding thing. And that's what baptism points to. Baptism is a demonstration of our desperate need for Jesus to wash us.

I don't know if you've ever thought about it. The water is a symbol of two things. It's a symbol of life, of life giving, life springing refreshment. But it's also a symbol of death.

It's a symbol of being drowned, of being crucified. And the most important moment comes when we mark each child with the sign of the cross to show that they be Christ's forever because it is in the cross that our righteousness and our security and our hope is.

It's the only place where our true identity comes from. That's why it's so important that in verse 20 the apostle speaks for every Christian when he says, I have been crucified with Christ.

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

[16 : 19] It's not a vague effect in our life. When I place my faith in Jesus Christ, I die, I am crucified with him.

This is not just a nice legal way of speaking. It is a living personal union with the Lord Jesus Christ and it changes us at the core of who we are so that my focus is no longer me, but my life is around Jesus Christ.

It means the end of an old sort of life where I indulged and coddled and admired myself, a life lived out of fear of your approval and disapproval, a life based on my hard work, and it means a new life of God's love, a new life of actual communion with the living Jesus Christ where God calls me righteous.

It's no longer I who live, Christ lives in me. It's not that our personalities cease to exist, but that our true lives are animated by communion with Jesus Christ.

And every Christian from time to time looks at their life and they are just amazed and they think, how could I have possibly done that? It was Jesus Christ in me. And where does faith get its power to convey this new life to us?

[17 : 43] It comes from this, that when we look at the cross of Jesus Christ and we grasp hold of Jesus Christ, we know there is the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

And that is how we are defined. We are not defined by what people think of us, we are defined by that one act of God, where Jesus has taken my sins.

The cross of Jesus Christ is the core of who we are. And that is our freedom. The cross of Jesus Christ means I am free not to justify myself before God or you, but I am free to accept the fact that I am a sinful person.

I am defined by what God has done in his love for me. And that's why we've met today, that's what we celebrate when we gather together, it is this freedom.

I'm not loved because I'm good or because I'm bad, I'm loved because of Jesus Christ and what he has done. My hope is not based on my own moral rectitude, it is based on God's grace for me in Jesus Christ.

[18 : 52] I am free from being defined by how good I am or how bad I am, I am defined by the cross of Jesus Christ and through faith we begin a life long process where we learn not to be defined by our approval or disapproval of each other, but by the love of God.

Where my hopes and my dreams and my secret thoughts and our plans and decisions for me and for my children are shaped not by the culture but by the crucifixion and it only comes from one place, from Jesus Christ who loved me and gave himself for me because when I take hold of Jesus Christ I take hold of every good thing that God can give me, righteousness, eternal life, forgiveness, happiness. We're not who we are because of fear, we are who we are because of love and not just any love, but the love of God who gave himself for us, this is who we are.

And I think it's a very good thing on this Thanksgiving weekend that we give thanks to God for that. Let's kneel and pray....