

Gospel Unity

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me to Galatians chapter 2? We are looking at verses 1-10 today.

! As you turn there, I just want to express some thanksgiving for all the good things that have been happening lately in our church body, the three-week women's Bible study that just concluded, the men's breakfast yesterday. I also continue to hear about good things happening in small groups.

How many of you, raise your hand, are part of a Trinity small group? It's like 90% of the church right here. So, you know, I'm sure there were lots of hands at home too. You know, it's encouraging to see the Word of God reverberating in our church fellowship as we build each other up in love, as Paul says in Ephesians 4. Well, let's go ahead and take a look at our passage in Galatians 2.

As we come to this text, let me pray for us. Father, help us now as we come to Your Word. Lord, would we be edified by Your Spirit?

Would we be built up in love? Would we be strengthened in our faith? Would we be renewed in our hope? We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

[1 : 16] All right, Galatians 2, 1-10. Paul writes this, Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery, to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

And from those who seemed to be influential, what they were makes no difference to me. God shows no partiality. Those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised, for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised, worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles.

And when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

Only they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. So, our passage today is about unity in the gospel, gospel unity.

Now, let's remember the context here. In these early chapters of Galatians, Paul is responding to false charges and criticism that he not only received his gospel message from the other apostles in Jerusalem, but also that he had been misrepresenting the gospel that the other apostles preached.

[3 : 18] In other words, there were false teachers in Galatia saying that Paul's message was both derivative and deficient, kind of like a photocopy of a photocopy, all kind of blurry and darkened and faded.

They were saying that his gospel wasn't the real thing. So, in response to these charges, Paul, in chapters 1 and 2 of Galatians, gives us some autobiography.

In fact, if you're looking for a handy outline of the book of Galatians, chapters 1 and 2 are biography, chapters 3 and 4 are theology, and chapters 5 and 6 are ethics. And Paul's going to walk through each of those as we go through this book.

But in these first two chapters, he's giving us some autobiography. In chapter 1, we heard Paul tell the story of how he received his gospel not from the other apostles, but directly from Jesus Christ himself.

In chapter 1, verses 11 through 24, Paul tells the story of how his apostolic message and ministry were not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead, which is how the book starts in verse 1.

[4 : 30] So, last week we saw Paul respond to this false charge that his gospel isn't the real gospel by showing how he received it directly from Jesus independently of the other apostles. But today, in the passage we just read from chapter 2, Paul now argues that even though his gospel doesn't depend on the other apostles, it is in fact the same gospel that they preach.

Here, Paul recounts how some of the apostles in Jerusalem, far from preaching a different gospel than Paul, affirmed and validated Paul's gospel as their gospel too.

In other words, despite what the false teachers were saying to the Galatians, Paul's gospel and what we might call the one true apostolic gospel are one and the same.

The gospel, the gospel, the gospel, the gospel, the good news, that God justifies sinners, whether Jew or Gentile, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, apart from our works.

That is the one true apostolic gospel. So, don't let anyone deceive you or mislead you, Paul says.

[5 : 56] This isn't just my gospel, Paul's saying. It's the gospel. God raised Jesus from the dead. He is Lord and Christ. And all who are united to the Lord Jesus by faith are released from all their guilt, accepted as righteous in God's sight, and become full members and participants in God's family and God's kingdom.

So, what we have here in chapter 2, verses 1 through 10, is Paul recounting an episode from earlier in his life where this apostolic unity in the gospel was affirmed and established.

And with the time that we have, I want to take a closer look at this gospel unity because I think there are a lot of things that we can learn from it today.

I want to pull out three lessons for us. The first one is this. Gospel unity is worth pursuing. Gospel unity is worth pursuing.

Look again at verses 1 and 2. Paul says, Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them, though privately, before those who seemed influential, the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain.

[7 : 14] Now, Paul here is most likely describing the visit that he and Barnabas made to Jerusalem at the end of Acts 11.

If we pick up where our first Scripture reading left off this morning, we read this. It says, Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, and one of them, named Agabus, stood up and foretold by the Spirit how there would be a great famine all over the world.

This took place in the days of Claudius. So the disciples determined everyone according to his ability to send relief to the brothers living in Judea, and they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Sahal.

So, we see there that Paul and Barnabas went up to Jerusalem because of a revelation that a famine was soon to come, and they brought relief to the churches in Judea.

But while Paul is there, he makes an express point to go to the other apostles living in Jerusalem and to make sure that they are proclaiming the same gospel.

[8 : 20] Now, why does Paul go through the trouble to set up this private meeting? Well, he says, Now, Paul doesn't mean that he was worried over the accuracy or truthfulness of what he was teaching.

He wasn't sort of checking in with the Jerusalem apostles to see whether he had gotten it right or wrong, right? He had been doing ministry for 14 years at this point. According to chapter 1 of Galatians, Paul was quite sure that the message he received was from Jesus himself.

It was the true gospel. So, if Paul didn't have misgivings about his own preaching, what was he concerned about? Well, Paul realized that if he and the leaders in Jerusalem were not on the same page, then all his work among the Gentiles would be severely threatened.

Why? Well, you know why, right? Imagine Pastor Matt got up one week and said, God saves sinners through faith in Christ, so believe in Him and be saved.

And then the next week I got up and said, God saves sinners through faith in Jesus Christ, if you also get circumcised and keep the regulations of Moses. So, believe in Jesus, get circumcised, keep the law, and then you'll be saved.

[9 : 40] Well, everything that Matt had done the previous week would be severely undermined by me the following week. And that's exactly what Paul didn't want to happen between his and Barnabas' ministry in Antioch at this point in history and the apostles' ministry in Jerusalem.

So, their gospel unity was worth pursuing. Why? So that their labors wouldn't be in vain. As Paul and Barnabas pioneered the gospel work in Antioch among the Galatians, they knew it was vital to establish the unity of the gospel message.

They needed to be proclaiming the same gospel or else their labors would be in vain. So they took the time to meet together and to talk through what they believed and why to make sure that they held the most important thing in unison.

Gospel unity is worth pursuing. Now, today, this is important still. It's important between local churches, right? We want to partner with other churches who believe and proclaim the biblical gospel.

Of course, it takes time to get to know other ministries and other leaders in our city. It takes time to learn about church planting networks, with whom we're on the same page, right?

[11 : 02] It takes time to get to know other congregations throughout our region. But this unity in the gospel is worth pursuing.

I'm incredibly grateful that Trinity can be a part of church networks that hold the gospel in common, whether it's our local Connecticut Baptist Association or whether it's our New Haven Network, Bridges of Hope with other gospel-preaching churches, or whether it's the gospel coalition nationally.

We want to pursue this gospel unity. You see, local churches aren't meant to be just little islands pretending as if we can simply do it alone. We need to pursue unity in the gospel with other churches so that we don't run the race in vain.

But this isn't just true between local churches. It's even more true within a local church. Our unity here at Trinity is grounded in one thing, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If as fellow members of the church we don't hold the gospel in common, then surely all our labors will be in vain. I've actually witnessed churches where unity is not based on the gospel, but on family heritage or mutual friendship or on appreciation for a certain tradition or on a worship aesthetic or on similar, you know, interests in social causes.

[12 : 32] And eventually, friends, those churches fall apart. Most churches that splinter and die or that wither in stagnation do so because they haven't done the necessary and hard work of pursuing unity in the gospel.

So at Trinity, we ask every incoming member, tell me, what's your understanding of the gospel? In a nutshell, what is this life-saving good news?

We want to ask that question and pursue it. We want to make it a point to put the gospel front and center because if we don't have unity in the gospel, then we're simply running in vain.

And, you know, this isn't true just between local churches or within local churches. I mean, think about some of our most important relationships, right? I think we can also say that pursuing unity in the gospel is critical in something like marriage, for example.

If you're considering a potential spouse, unity in the gospel is absolutely necessary. If you don't share a common understanding of the gospel, then your marriage simply won't have the foundation to support you through all the ups and downs and trials and joys of married life.

[13 : 53] And if you're already married and you find that you don't currently have this sort of unity, then make it your regular, earnest prayer that God would bring this about. Call out to God.

Go to His throne of grace. He hears your prayers. So we see first that gospel unity here is worth pursuing.

The next lesson we see is that in our pursuit of gospel unity, gospel truth must be defended. In our pursuit of gospel unity, the truth of the gospel needs to be defended.

We see this in verses 3 through 5, where Paul says, but even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was Greek. Yet, because a false brother secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus so that they might bring us into slavery, to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

You see, Paul knew that the very truth of the gospel was at stake when these false brothers slipped in to his meeting with the other apostles, and they began, presumably, to demand that Titus be circumcised if he was going to have fellowship with them.

[15 : 08] Now, why did Paul perceive that the truth of the gospel was at stake? Well, because they were adding a necessary requirement to salvation over and above what Christ had accomplished through his death and resurrection, you see.

And whether these false brothers, as Paul calls them, thought of circumcision as an act of moral obedience or as an identity marker of being Jewish, it doesn't really matter.

To require anything in addition to Jesus' person and work as a necessary condition of salvation, as a necessary condition to be accepted into God's family, to put any other necessary condition or requirement on top of what Jesus has done is to jettison the very heart of the gospel.

So Paul here is unyielding, he says. Now, if you know the story of Acts, you know that in a little while after writing the book of Galatians, Paul actually does circumcise another one of his young partners in ministry named Timothy before they go off on another one of their missionary journeys.

So what's the difference? Why be utterly unyielding with Titus but then be super flexible with Timothy? I mean, did Timothy sort of like draw the short end of the stick here? Like, what was going on?

[16 : 36] Well, the difference is obvious, right? The difference is that in the case of Titus, circumcision was being made a requirement for salvation.

It was being made a necessary part of the gospel itself. Whereas with Timothy, it was done in freedom. It was done willingly in order to lower barriers between himself and unbelieving Jews.

The one case threatened the gospel. The other case was an expression of love for the lost flowing out of the gospel. That's a big difference.

And Paul saw the difference. And in the case of Titus, he was unwilling to yield at all so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved. Friends, are we also willing to be unyielding when the truth of the gospel is at stake?

And like Paul, are we motivated to be unyielding? Not for the sake of our pride, not for the sake of our reputation, but for the sake of others.

[17 : 48] Notice, Paul says, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. In that moment in Jerusalem with Titus and Barnabas and the false brothers demanding circumcision, it wasn't Paul's pride that was on the line.

It wasn't about Paul being right and then being wrong. It was all about the Gentile believers and whether they would be assured and grounded in the real freedom of the gospel.

Paul's heart in that moment was beating for the men and women who had turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to know the liberating grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, to be free from guilt and shame.

His heart was beating for those who were once far off but had been brought near. How? By the blood of Christ. If Titus was forced to be circumcised, if Paul went along with it, then the gospel of grace for all people would be lost.

Do we see the truth of the gospel in this way? It's not just about winning theological points or being a part of a certain tribe.

[19 : 09] It's about the souls of men and women really coming to know the life-changing power of the gospel of grace. It's about really knowing the finished work of Christ and the freedom from guilt and dominion of sin and the law.

So when we are unyielding about central things, the authority of Scripture, the exclusivity of Christ, the substitutionary work of the cross, justification by faith alone, the bodily resurrection, these core gospel truths, when we are unyielding on those things, it's not because we're being doctrinaire or because we relish a good theological fight.

It's because we love the people for whom Christ died and we don't want anything to keep them from knowing Christ crucified and the real glory of the gospel of grace.

So as we pursue gospel unity, yes, the truth of the gospel must be defended at times. There can be unity in the gospel.

There cannot be unity in the gospel without the truth of the gospel. So we don't yield when the gospel is at stake. And now we come to our last point.

[20 : 41] We've seen that gospel unity is worth pursuing and we've seen that in our pursuit of gospel unity, the truth of the gospel needs to be defended. The last point is this. In our pursuit of gospel unity, not only must gospel truth be defended, but gospel love must be expressed.

The love of the gospel must be expressed. Look again with me at verses 6 through 10. Paul says, and from those who seem to be influential, what they were makes no difference to me.

God shows no partiality. Those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. That is, they added nothing on top of the gospel, right? On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised, for he, that is God, who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised, worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles.

And when James and Cephas, that's Peter, right, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

Only they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. So you see, the gospel produces not just courage that refuses to yield, but it also produces love that refuses to be partial or partisan.

[22 : 19] You see that here? Notice how often Paul says, what they were makes no difference to me. Yes, the apostles in Jerusalem, James and Peter and John, they seemed influential.

After all, wasn't James Jesus' brother? Weren't Peter and John part of Jesus' inner group of the disciples during His earthly ministry? People, it seems, had been looking up to them, respecting them, viewing these three as pillars in God's new temple, the church, viewing them as more significant than the other apostles.

apostles. And as humans, don't we have a natural tendency, right, to kind of elevate personalities and then to create kind of tribes or cliques? But Paul says, look, what they were makes no difference to me.

God shows no partiality. To some, they might have seemed more influential than the other apostles. To some, they might have seemed like the real pillars of the church. But Paul says, their apostolic message and their apostolic ministry was in reality no different than His.

Before the Lord Jesus Christ, they were equal. There was no partiality. And that is what the apostles affirm in this moment. They see that God had given His empowering grace both to Peter and Paul alike and to all the apostles.

[23 : 52] Yes, they may have had different mission fields, Peter primarily to the Jews, right, Paul primarily to the Gentiles, although of course there was lots of overlap there. But, they have the same message, the same empowering grace, and most importantly, the same Lord, the Lord Jesus.

And that means they can put personality aside. They can put partisanship aside. They can put the opinions of others aside. and they can extend the right hand of fellowship to one another.

They can reach out across all of that and give each other the embrace of gospel unity. They can be genuinely for each other's ministry because they know that they serve the same Lord and the same kingdom and the same mission.

You know, this is why we pray for other local churches regularly in our services. praise God that Trinity isn't the only local church in New Haven that proclaims the biblical gospel. We couldn't even fit that many people in our sanctuary, right?

It's got to be more than us. So, we pray for other faithful churches because we serve the same Lord and we preach the same message of grace and we serve the same kingdom and we serve the same king.

[25 : 11] Just as Peter and Paul weren't in competition with one another, so we aren't in competition with Christ Presbyterian Church or with Vox Church or with Christian Tabernacle or St. John's or Elm City Vineyard.

If any church proclaims the biblical gospel faithfully, then we can extend the right hand of fellowship. Now, that doesn't mean that what we might call our secondary doctrines and practices are completely irrelevant, right?

I think there are really good reasons to preach expositionally, to practice believer's baptism, to sing old hymns and contemporary songs, to have a plurality of elders, to prioritize meeting in person rather than virtually when it's not a snow day, right?

I think I can give some really good reasons why churches should do these things. And I think it's good to attend a church that does these things.

But you know what? Those things aren't the gospel. They aren't matters of first importance. Are they important?

[26 : 27] Absolutely. Some of them are very important. Are they of first importance? No. So we can extend the love of the gospel and the right hand of fellowship to our brothers and sisters with whom we may disagree about secondary issues.

We can partner in ministry together like we do through Bridges of Hope. We can pray earnestly for each other. We can worship and work together for Christ's sake because we hold the matters of first importance together.

But love doesn't stop there. Paul ends the passage by saying, only they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

You see, friends, we are saved by faith in Christ alone. But saving faith is never alone.

The faith that unites us to Christ, the living Lord, is a faith that inevitably issues forth in love and good deeds. In Christ, we're a new creation.

[27 : 42] The old has passed away, the new has come. Paul will say a little later in this chapter, it's no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me. Amen. All his heavenly riches and became poor in our place, he emptied himself so that we, through his poverty, might become spiritually rich.

And so, having received such a gift, how could we not now turn to those in need and seek to meet their needs? Now, think about it.

Of course, if I think that my salvation before God is based on something I've done to deserve it, whether that be my circumcision, like the false teachers in Galatians we're teaching, or my moral efforts, or my regular church attendance, if I think my salvation with God is based on something I've done to deserve it, then I am much more likely to view the world through the lens of who does and doesn't deserve my help.

After all, if God only saves those who do something to deserve it, shouldn't I treat others the same way? And, if I think I've actually done something good enough or smart enough or spiritual enough to earn God's salvation, then how could I not expect others to be able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and help themselves?

But, friends, that's not the gospel. The gospel says that you and I are sinners. We've made a wreck of things with God and we can't earn our way out.

[29 : 34] God's rescue is completely and totally by grace. When we were dead in our sins, Christ made us alive. In other words, if you believe in justification by faith alone, there's no way you should view the world through the grid of deserving and undeserving because you and I don't deserve anything good that we've received.

It's all of grace. And that changes how you see those in material need, especially fellow Christians. The poor here in verse 10 probably referred specifically to those suffering churches in Judea that Paul and Barnabas and Titus had gone there to help in the first place.

And Paul says he was eager to help them. And when we read the rest of Paul's letters, we see that a large part of his ministry among the Gentile churches was organizing a financial collection that would then be sent back to help those Jewish Christian churches in Judea who were materially in need.

You see, the gospel of grace cuts across racial, ethnic, national, socioeconomic lines. It creates a whole new humanity that's bonded together in love. So we're eager to help when we hear of needs.

But not just, not just for our fellow Christians. Historically, Christians have cared for the poor whether they're Christians or not.

[31 : 03] Why? Because again, is this not the very logic, the very heartbeat of the gospel. Grace.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved what? A pretty good guy like me. No, a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found.

I was blind, but now I see. When I was an outsider, Christ left everything to bring me in. when I was far off, he went out into the far country.

I was condemned, so he was condemned. I was dead, so he died. I was poor, so he became poor. And through his death and his poverty and his condemnation, through that, he rose victorious and rose me with him and rose you with him if you've put your trust in him.

And do you see that? Do you see then that the way to life, to real lasting resurrection life, isn't through amassing wealth for myself, but through giving out of any abundance that I have to those in need.

[32 : 22] The way to life isn't through ignoring the poor or the needy or the suffering of this world, but remembering them. And together with all the church, letting our resources meet their needs wherever we can.

the very thing I was eager to do, Paul says. Of course, of course. How could the gospel not make you eager, eager to live out the love of the gospel because we have first been loved?

Let's pray. Father in heaven, help us to live out this gospel unity. Unite us as a local church together around this wonderful, life-saving message of Jesus crucified and risen.

Lord, help us to forge good relationships with other like-minded gospel-preaching churches that we might advance your gospel all the more winsomely and effectively together. And Lord Jesus, help us to be a church of unyielding commitment to truth and passionate, compassionate, eager love for those in need.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.