

GALATIANS

Lesson 5

Social Responsibility in the Gospel Galatians 2:11-14

INTRODUCTION

To have a grasp of the gospel of grace is a great privilege but with this privilege comes definite responsibilities. How wonderful it is to know that God chooses us to salvation in grace, and that Christ died for our sins in grace and that the Holy Spirit regenerated us in grace. But with an understanding of grace comes the responsibility of making the doctrine of grace applicable in our daily lives. What we hold theologically will affect how we live practically.

In this section of Galatians, Paul will show how the gospel of grace is designed to break down every barrier between men. The specific problem that Paul will deal with is between Jews and Gentiles, and he will show that all spiritual and social prejudices between the Jews and the Gentiles in the early church were done away with through the gospel of grace.

PETER'S SOCIAL LEGALISM 2:11-12

“When Peter came to Antioch”

In Galatians one, Paul has been giving a brief autobiography of his life. The next event Paul recorded for us was his dispute with the Apostle Peter. This event occurred in Antioch of Syria, the hub of Gentile Christianity sometime after the Jerusalem Council. You recall that at the Jerusalem Council, it was determined for all time for all the church that observance of the Mosaic Law was not a condition for salvation, and Peter was the chief proponent of this truth. Apparently, Peter left Jerusalem to visit the mission field in Antioch.

“I opposed him to his face”

This undoubtedly was one of the most tense and dramatic events in the New Testament. The two leading apostles of Jesus Christ, Peter and Paul, came face to face in open conflict over a certain aspect of the gospel of grace. These two men were Christians and had received the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, they were both apostles, respected in the church for their leadership and had been mightily used by God. However, the leaven of legalism was still at work in the church. Paul had to rebuke Peter because he perverted the gospel of grace by separating himself from other Gentile-Christians and would no longer eat with them. Peter was a converted Jew and knew the gospel of grace taught that Gentiles who received Christ were on the same spiritual and social plane with converted Jews. Yet, Peter gave into the legalistic teachings of the Judaizers and began to teach that observance of the ceremonial and social aspects of the Mosaic Law made Christians more spiritual. It put them, they thought, on a higher plane than those who refused to be burdened by the law. The legalists formed an inner circle, a spiritual aristocracy, which made them think they were better than Gentile-Christians. Peter slipped into legalism and Paul had to rebuke him.

It was not that Peter denied the gospel of grace intellectually, for he agreed with the Apostle Paul on the essentials of the truth of the gospel, but he denied the gospel of grace and its implications to life. He would not eat with Gentile brothers in Christ on certain occasions. Peter's offense was not doctrinal but in conduct, not in teaching but in practice, not in knowledge but in behavior. Peter's life was contradictory to the gospel of grace. He was denying the gospel, not with words but with actions.

“Because he was clearly in the wrong”

Because of his actions, Peter came under the judgment of the Gentile-Christians in Antioch and he was clearly at fault. Peter had a clear understanding of grace. God had given Peter a vision years before when visiting Cornelius and told him God made the Gentiles spiritually acceptable through the death of Christ (Acts 10:28 **“He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.”**”). He also knew the final decision of the Council of Jerusalem that Gentiles were in no way under the Mosaic Law. Peter clearly understood grace but in Antioch he lived like he was under the law. He denied the gospel of grace by his actions.

“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.”

When Peter first came to Antioch, he had the habit of eating meals with his Gentile brothers in Christ. He did not feel contaminated or defiled by these Gentiles because at that time he was operating under a clear understanding of the gospel of grace. He knew Jews and Gentiles were one in Christ.

One day a group of legalists came from Jerusalem and claimed it was wrong for Jewish-Christians to have fellowship with uncircumcised Gentiles who claimed to be followers with uncircumcised Gentiles who claimed to be followers of Jesus Christ. We do not know whether these were Judaizers who falsely claimed James sent them to Antioch, or whether they were true believers in Christ who were sent to Antioch by James to get them straightened out on some of their legalistic Christianity. My belief is that Judaizers somehow hoodwinked James in Jerusalem and James gave a generic approval of the Judaizers. The Judaizers, however, deceitfully interpreted the document to make it mean what they wanted it to say. Legalists will use any deceptive means to make their point.

The issue in this case dealt with the relationship of Gentiles to the Jewish dietary laws of the Old Testament. These Judaizers said that fellowship with Gentiles and eating Gentile foods (unkosher foods) were not right and real Christians should have nothing to do socially with these Gentiles.

When this legalistic party came to Antioch, they put pressure on the Apostle Peter and he became a convert to legalistic Christianity. Peter who had previously eaten with the Gentiles separated himself, fearing what these legalistic Judaizers might say if he exercised his spiritual and social liberty in Christ. Peter became wishy-washy in his theological convictions out of fear what men might say or think about him. Peter was not ignorant but he lacked courage to act consistently on the principles of the gospel of grace.

Many Christians compromise their real beliefs because they want to be liked. They want acceptance. They need to be liked more than they need to stand for truth.

There are legalistic pressure groups today, small but vocal, in the 20th century church. Legalists who say, “Believe in Christ and speak in tongues and you will be saved.” There are other legalists who say real Christians do not smoke, drink, dance or chew and so not go with the girls who do. They make some external taboo the criterion for salvation. It is true that smoking, drinking, dancing, and chewing have something to do with our testimony before men and perhaps our effectiveness as a Christian, but they have nothing to do with salvation. Did you realize there are multiple millions of Muslims who neither smoke nor drink who are not saved because they have not trusted in Christ? Legalistic pressure groups within the church can destroy the spirit of Christ and drive many from achieving real holiness in this life.

THE SUBTLE DEPARTURE OF BARNABAS

“The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy”

The other Jewish-Christians in Antioch were caught up in the hypocrisy of failing to rightly apply the gospel of grace. They were practicing law, which was the height of hypocrisy.

“So that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.”

Even Barnabas, Paul’s trusted friend and companion in the gospel of grace became infected by this legalistic approach to the gospel. This temporary defection of Barnabas was a terrific blow to Paul and to the gospel. The Apostle Paul was the only Jewish-Christian in all of Antioch who was standing for the truth. Barnabas, a one-time champion of grace, had become a turncoat in the practical application of grace.

We see from these verses that it is possible for true believers to go astray doctrinally and practically from grace. The cause of this defection is usually fear of social pressures from one’s contemporaries. Social pressure may give us a good reason why Christians and ministers compromise the gospel of grace. Many Christians want to be liked; they do not want to be different. Christians get into legalism, developing negative and harsh attitudes, and make other Christians feel guilty and like a nerd if they don’t conform to legalism.

If the Apostle Paul had not taken his stand against Peter that day almost two thousand years ago, the whole Christian Church may have drifted into Jewish legalism, or there would have been a permanent division between Gentile and Jewish Christendom. Paul’s courage on that occasion in resisting Peter and Barnabas preserved the practical application of the gospel and the international brotherhood of the church.

PAUL’S STERN REBUKE OF PETER 2:14

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, --

Paul clearly saw that Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish-Christians did not have straightforward, unwavering, sincere conduct towards the Gentile-Christians in the application of the gospel of grace. All were guilty, but Paul only rebukes Peter because he was the leader. Peter was not dealing honestly and consistently with the practical outworking of believing in the grace of God in salvation. He had an attitude that led him to juggle the gospel’s sacred truth, to warp it, to misrepresent it and to deal crookedly with it.

The whole meaning of the gospel of grace was at stake, and Paul was not about to let legalism destroy the grace of God. Legalism in Christianity does not produce holiness and love but critical spirits and hyper-separation attitudes.

I said to Peter in front of them all, ‘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, a Christian-Jew, was living under grace like a Christian-Gentile and ate with them freely, but then he fell from a right practice of grace and separated himself from all saved Gentiles. He tried to force all saved Gentiles to live as Jews. Peter may not have insisted on Gentiles being circumcised but that they keep the dietary laws of the Jews.

Peter was clearly wrong. If Peter was the first pope, as Roman Catholics believe, he was liable to error and his pronouncements in this case were not infallible but full of inconsistencies.

Paul rebuked Peter before all the Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, in Antioch. Peter’s defection had affected all who Paul rebuked him before all. There is a place for public rebuke in Christian circles, and the general rule is: “Private sin is dealt with privately; public sin is dealt with publicly.”

Again, what was Peter’s problem? It was not in his belief in the gospel of grace but in his practical application of it. Paul feared that those who followed Peter’s example without Peter’s theological understanding would naively conclude that observance of the Mosaic Law must be added to faith in Christ if people are going to be truly saved.

Paul's big point is that all who have been saved by grace through faith are one in Christ. All Christians are accepted before God on the same terms—through simple faith in Christ alone. It is never right to refuse fellowship to any true Christian. If God accepts a man or woman, dare anyone reject them? (Rom. 15:7 "**Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.**")

The issue in the early church was fellowship of all true believers who had been touched by the grace of God. True Christians were not to separate over cultural, social, racial, political or educational differences for all are in Christ. The gospel of grace is the great equalizer of men. All who trust Christ are merely sinners saved by grace.

The controversy between Paul and Peter is still raging today especially in the area of fellowship. Many Christians in modern times are still in one form or another repeating Peter's mistake.

Some Christians refuse to have fellowship with other Christians because they are of a different social level. The rich snub the poor; the educated slight the uneducated and the prominent neglect the less prominent. Why? Because people in our churches do not understand or apply the gospel of grace. Men have never been humbled by the grace of God.

The most parallel situation to the separation problems of the New Testament in the 20th century is the race issue in our churches. Due to racial prejudice we have for all practical purposes created black and white churches. Someone had said, "The most segregated hour in any given week is Sunday between 11:00 a.m. and 12:00 noon."

Men who claim to be recipients of the gospel of grace refuse to fellowship spiritually or socially with Christian brothers of another color of skin. This is a failure to apply the doctrines of grace, and those who do it are guilty of a misrepresentation of the gospel of grace, as was Peter. We send money to Africa to reach the black man for Christ, and we cannot even accept a black brother into our churches at home. What hypocrisy! What shame! What a mockery this makes of the true gospel of grace! To speak grace and shun Christian brothers of other races is to live a lie. This kind of action cannot be tolerated for one moment in our churches. Paul would not tolerate prejudice in the early church and neither should we! We need men and women today who will stand firm for a proper application of the gospel of grace and not give in to the legalistic pressure groups within the church. Are you that man or woman?

CONCLUSION

What is the gospel of grace? It is the good news that sinners, guilty and under the judgment of God, may be pardoned and accepted by God's sheer grace on the basis of Christ's death and resurrection. Works cannot save and only God's grace can save. Salvation cannot be earned but it is a gift from God to undeserving sinners.

To receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, a person must trust in Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. When you trust Christ, God will begin to change your desires so as to enable you to apply the gospel of grace to your experience. The Bible says, "**You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**" (Gal.3:26-28)