November 22, 2026

A CONFRONTATION AND THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL

Galatians 2:11-14

(5 of 19 in a series through Galatians)

In Galatians 2:11-14, Paul tells a story that can really shake us as readers. No character in the story behaves in a way that we'd anticipate. In the story, Peter has come from Jerusalem to visit with Paul, Barnabas, and the believers there, and things are going well. And then everything takes a sideways turn.

As Paul tells the story, Peter is eating with the Gentile believers at Antioch one day when a group of men show up from Jerusalem, specifically we're told "from James" (who is seen as the leader of the Jerusalem church). But instead of these men from James adding to the enjoyment of having so many highly regarded believers in one place, everything and everyone begins acting in a way we wouldn't anticipate.

We're told that once these men arrive, Peter pulls back and stops eating with the Gentile believers—an act that Paul says is "condemned" and is "conduct . . . not in step with the truth of the gospel." Next, Barnabas is negatively swayed by what Peter is doing. And before we get our bearings, Paul is standing up and confronting Peter in front of everyone to his face. What in the world is going on? How'd we get here? I mean, the last time Paul gave us an update, Peter, James, Paul, Barnabas, and all the Jerusalem apostles were shaking hands and affirming that they all preached the same gospel and didn't think Gentiles needed to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses in order to be saved. And now, what feels like five seconds later, we're wondering, "Did James secretly disagree? Why did Peter pull back from the Gentiles? Is his action really egregious? Is Barnabas still on Paul's side with these issues? Is Paul right to confront Peter like that?" Do you see how odd this scene is that Paul narrates for us in these few verses? And all of that leads to another question: "Why does Paul tell us this story?" I mean, this doesn't look good. Surely the confidence of the Galatian believers isn't helped by Paul telling this crazy story, is it? What was Paul's aim?

And the important question that I've been asking all week is: How do I preach this text? Well, let me start by answering that one. Here's how I want to go about preaching this text today. First, I want to try to sort out what and why everything happened in this text. As I've already noted, it raises a lot of questions, and so I want to sort try to sort it out by answering a series of questions. Then, I want to tell you what I think the main point of this text is. That is, I want to tell you why I think Paul relayed this crazy story that at first glance we might be tempted to think he never should have mentioned, let alone write it down in Scripture. And, finally, I want to give us some notes of application because this text has implications for how we need to think and act as believers. So, let's start by trying to explain the situation by asking and answering a series of questions. First, what was going on prior to this explosive moment?

What was going on prior to this explosive moment?

To understand why Peter getting up and drawing back from eating with the Gentiles was such a big deal, we need to understand everything going on prior to this moment. And there are really two things happening that cause this act to be so explosive. First, before these men from James came down, Peter had been in happy fellowship with these Gentile believers in Antioch. We know that he'd been happily sharing meals with them, but I think he had also been eating the foods that Gentiles ate, including foods that Jews typically abstained from because they were forbidden according to the law of Moses.

Now, the reason I say that Peter was likely eating foods forbidden by the law of Moses is because when Paul addresses him in verse 14, he begins by saying, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew." And when he says that Peter is living like a Gentile, he almost certainly means that Peter recognized that he wasn't bound to the food laws given by Moses, that Jesus had declared all foods clean, and that he nor these Gentile believers needed to be concerned about what they were eating in order to be righteous before God. So Peter and these Gentile believers are fellowshipping around the idea that they're all justified before God not by keeping the law of Moses but by trusting in the crucified and risen Lord alone.

But there's another background element at play that we need to recognize that leads to this explosive moment. There are professing believers in Jerusalem—whom Paul refers to as "the circumcision party" (and we've referred as "Judaizers")—who are arguing that Gentiles need to do more than simply place their faith in Christ to be saved. They also need to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses.

Now, we've already been made aware of this group from Paul mentioning them in 2:4 and referring to them as "false brothers," but we're also aware of them from Acts 15, a helpful chapter for understanding the issues going on. Acts 15 begins with Luke telling us, "Some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the law of Moses, you cannot be saved" (v. 1). Then, he expands on their argument, noting in Acts 15:5 that they were saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

And thankfully, this provoked a big meeting with Paul, Barnabas, and the Jerusalem apostles where Peter showed he understood the issues and spoke the truth with great clarity, saying to those pushing for this view, "Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (Acts 15:10-11).

You see, Peter understood that the issue wasn't merely about the idea that it'd be good for Gentile believers to bear some Jewish identity markers like getting circumcised, eating the right foods, and resting on the sabbath so that there might be some uniformity in the church. That's why he said that this yoke being pressed on the Gentiles by this circumcision party is one "that

neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear." I assure you, Peter and his fathers easily bore the identity markers of circumcision, food laws, and sabbath-keeping. What he nor his fathers could bear is the responsibility to perfectly obey the law. And Peter understood that if you go down that road of trying to obey the law to be justified, then you're bound to obey it perfectly—something he nor his fathers could do. And that's why he followed up that statement saying, "We will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus." In other words, Peter understood rightly that the issue at hand was: are we saved by grace through faith alone or by our works.

So, that's the background. People are challenging justification by faith alone, suggesting that Gentiles need to keep the law as well. And while that's going on, Peter is happily living out what we just read he professed to be true in Acts 15 by eating with these Gentiles in full affirmation that they're justified believers and part of the people of God. That's the background. But this leads to another question: Did James, Peter, Barnabas, and others then change their minds in this incident?

Did James, Peter, Barnabas, and others change their minds in this incident?

You can see why you might want to ask this. I mean, if James, Peter, and Barnabas all agreed in Acts 15 as well as in the meeting Paul recounted in Galatians 2:1-10, then why is this delegation coming from James, and why are Peter and Barnabas suddenly pulling away from the Gentiles after these men come?

Let's start with James. Actually Paul tells us very little except that these "certain men" whose arrival prompted Peter to pull back from the Gentiles were "from James." But I don't think that means that James sent these men to tell Peter, "I don't think the Gentiles are really saved unless they are circumcised and obey the law." In fact, we know James didn't believe that according to Galatians 2:1-10 and Acts 15. Then what's going on?

Well, it could be one of two things in my mind. First, it might be that James sent these men just to tell Peter about how much they're suffering at the hands of these false brothers who make up the circumcision party, and Peter's reaction is to think, "I don't want them to persecute me when I get back to Jerusalem, so I'll just distance myself from these Gentiles now." That would make sense of Paul saying that Peter separated himself, "fearing the circumcision party." Or, it could be that these brothers came from James but didn't rightly represent James. Actually, in Acts 15:24, after this big council in Jerusalem on this issue, the Jerusalem apostles wrote a letter to the Gentile believers at Antioch, and it began, "Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions." And so, in light of that, it may be that these men came "from James" but weren't sent by James and weren't representing James in what they were saying. But when they showed up making this argument that Gentiles needed to obey the law of Moses to be saved, Peter feared them, not wanting to argue against them, and so just decided to distance himself. Either would make sense of what happens here, but neither suggests James had changed his mind on the gospel.

Well, Paul mentions that Peter and Barnabas both drew back, so did they change their minds about justification by faith alone? Well, no. Paul already noted that Peter was motivated not by his convictions but by fear. Moreover, Paul notes that Peter, Barnabas, and the others who separated themselves from the Gentile believers were acting "hypocritically" and labels their act "hypocrisy." And hypocrisy means that you believe one thing and do another. In other words, Peter, Barnabas, and the others all agreed with Paul that everyone is justified not by keeping works of the law but by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. It's simply that these men were acting contrary in their actions to what they knew to be true. Their actions were suggesting that law-keeping is a necessary basis for justification, while in their hearts and minds they knew otherwise.

And so let's ask one more question in order to grasp the details of this story and the weight of the incident. Why was Peter's act of separating himself such a big deal?

Why was Peter's act of separating himself such a big deal?

We know Paul sees it as a big deal because as soon as Peter separates himself from these Gentile believers, Paul confronts himself to his face, condemning his actions as being out of step with the truth of the gospel. But why?

Well, it's because these Gentile believers are hearing from the Judaizers (this circumcision party), "You need to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be justified. It's good that you believe and trust in Jesus, but that's not enough." And if that's been weighing on them, the fact that Peter has been assuring them they're justified by faith alone, fellowshipping with them, and eating with them is giving them increased confidence that we're saved by faith in the gospel alone. But the second Peter fears the circumcision party and gets up and distances himself from these Gentile believers, he's sending the message that maybe they're not okay after all. Maybe they do need faith plus their own works as a basis for their justification. In other words, though Peter believed that we're all justified by faith alone in his heart and made the argument with his words, his actions were saying, "Well, that's not really true."

That's why Paul said Peter's act was condemnable. It's why he said that this act was "conduct . . . not in step with the truth of the gospel" (v. 14). In other words, Peter's actions were suggesting that this false gospel being argued by some might actually be true. And so Paul acted to prevent any risk of this false gospel from spreading any further. That's what is going on in this incident.

Well, why did Paul record it, though? I mean, it kind of makes Peter and Barnabas look bad. It might be used by some falsely to claim that Peter and Paul disagreed.

Well, that may indeed be one aspect as to why Paul wanted to address it. Maybe this incident had been spoken of by the Judaizers to show that Paul and Peter disagreed, and now Paul is saying, "Actually, let me tell you exactly what happened that day to address any misconceptions." But for our purposes, the reason the Spirit inspired Paul to write this text, I believe, is to show us this central truth—the gospel has authority over every man.

The gospel has authority over every man

This is the main thing I think Paul wants us to see. Our hope should never be in any man as if he is infallible and authoritative. Our hope is in the gospel, the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Peter doesn't stand over the gospel. When his conduct is out of step with the truth of the gospel, he's corrected. Had Paul's conduct been out of step with the gospel, Paul would have needed correction. In fact, Paul had already said it more strongly when he said in Galatians 1:8, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed." Paul was saying there, "If I change the gospel, don't think the gospel changes. Think, Paul is condemned." That's how serious this is.

And this has implications for us. Cornerstone, your hope is not in any man, and it must never be. Your hope is in the Word of God and the gospel recorded therein. If I stray from the gospel, hold to the gospel and get rid of me. It's your hope, no pastor. In fact, we're only faithful pastors when we point you to the Word and its gospel as your ultimate authority.

Also, don't buy the argument that the Roman Catholic church makes in claiming that the church has at least equal authority to the Scripture if not more. Brothers and sisters, you can't square that claim with what we see in our text. The gospel has authority over every man. No one stands over the gospel and God's Word, granting them authority. God's Word and his gospel stand over us. That's the main point of the text, I believe, that the gospel has authority over every man.

But I also think there are some additional lessons that flow out of this truth that we can apply to our lives as we look at this text, and I want to note three of them as we close. First, don't underestimate your ability to fall into sin.

Don't underestimate your ability to fall into sin

I want to flesh out this point by first reminding you who Peter was. Peter was the one who courageously preached at Pentecost when 3,000 were added to the church. Peter is the one who boldly told the local governing authorities that he had to obey God rather than man (Acts 4:19-20). Peter was the one who after being arrested and beaten prayed and asked the Lord to grant him to be able to keep preaching—the very thing that had gotten him beaten. He spoke to Ananias and Sapphira and they died on the spot. People were healed by walking in his shadow. And he was used by the Lord to raise Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9:36-42). And this is the one who would be martyred for the faith.

Now, I could say more, but you get the picture. That very Peter I've just described is the one who acted contrary to the truth of the gospel. So, what's the lesson? Never think we're above falling. Don't let down your guard against sin because you think you've matured past such things. We can all fall into sin at any moment. This past year alone has borne witness to at least one man who had a faithful ministry only to have a moral failure in the twilight of his life. We are never in

a place to let our guard down in the fight against sin. Let's Peter's failure remind us of that. Second, recognize the effect our sin can have on others.

Recognize the effect our sin can have on others

In this text, Peter was the first to draw back and separate from the Gentile believers, but Paul writes in verse 13, "And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy." Our holiness aids others. When we stand strong, that brother or sister beside us finds greater strength to stand. When you resist giving in before the pressure of the crowds and culture, that brother or sister alongside of you can draw strength to have a firmer spine. But, sadly, the opposite is true as well.

When you head toward sin, you're not only affecting yourself. I wish it worked that way, but it doesn't. The next generation has often excused their sin in light of the fact that the previous generation sinned in those specific ways as well. And many times accountability groups have simply served to tell each other that sin is acceptable because they're back and forth simply saying, "I chased after sin again." And this is one more reason why sin must be taken seriously. We want to give no one the message by looking at our lives that sin is okay. We don't ever want to provide someone an excuse to rebel against Jesus. And so, once more, we must constantly wage war against sin and constantly keep our guard up. And, finally, building on these first two, lovingly confront your brothers and sisters who are walking in sin.

Lovingly confront your brothers and sisters who are walking in sin

Someone could read this text and get the idea that Paul was in the wrong. Surely, he shouldn't have confronted Peter to his face. And did it need to be so public? Well, let's consider what was going on. Peter's public actions had already affected others who were distancing themselves as well, and the message being spoken (through their actions) was that faith in the crucified and risen Lord isn't enough to be justified. It's not loving to let that falsehood be heralded. That's why Paul's confrontation was actually loving. He was fighting for the preservation of the truth of the gospel. If Peter hadn't been confronted, who knows what all damage could have been done among the Jewish believers who were mimicking Peter and the Gentile believers who were being told they need to do more to be saved?

And to the idea that Paul could have confronted Peter privately, Paul was following the principle that confrontation happens at the level of the sin. If a sin is private, it should be rebuked privately. But if a sin is heard and seen publicly, then it needs to be addressed publicly so that it cannot spread. So we must be committed to love one another enough to call our brothers and sisters back to obedience when they've strayed. That's what we've signed up for by joining a local church. We're saying to one another, "I'll help you walk in obedience to Jesus, and you help me too."

The scene of Galatians 2:11-14 is surely one we didn't anticipate. When you're reading the book of Acts, you get no indication that one day Paul might be confronting Peter to his face about

conduct that was not in step with the truth of the gospel. And yet what this scene shows is actually an encouraging truth—the gospel has authority over every man—and that we need to fight sin together that might pull us away from that truth. Therefore, let's commit this morning to upholding this gospel and making sure that in addition to speaking the gospel, we live lives that support the truth of the gospel as well. Amen.