

When the Cross was Undone over Lunch

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles now and to read, and we're back in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul's letter to the Galatians, excuse me, at chapter 2.

If you have one of our visitors' Bibles, you'll find it on page 973. And we're reading from Galatians 2 at verse 11, and to the end of the chapter.

Now, Rupert began last Sunday evening in Galatians chapter 1, and if you were here, you will recall that he was speaking about how Paul, the apostle here, is talking about his own ministry, his own God-given ministry of the gospel, which came directly from the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ, and how Paul saw no need to subject himself, particularly to the apostles in Jerusalem.

But that indeed, when he visited them, they found that their gospel was one and the same. There was nothing between them at all. They shared the same glorious gospel of free grace in Jesus Christ.

But the problem is not that sometimes people don't believe the same thing. It's that they think they believe the same thing, but they don't actually do what what they believe demands they should do.

[1 : 20] And that's the issue here in Galatians chapter 2. Here, Paul is telling us about true brothers in Christ who are, in fact, acting falsely, acting contrary to the gospel.

And that's why he begins in verse 11 with a but. So all was well, but when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.

For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles. But when they came, he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.

And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force Gentiles to live like Jews?

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners. Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, or as the footnote says, through the faith of Jesus Christ.

[2 : 41] So we also have believed in Jesus Christ in order to be justified by the faith of Christ and not by works of the law. Because by works of the law, no one will be justified.

But if in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?

Certainly not. For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law, I died to the law.

So that I might live to God, I have been crucified with Christ. It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

I do not nullify the grace of God. For if justification, if righteousness, were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

[3 : 52] Amen. And may God bless to us this, his word. Well, do please have Galatians chapter 2 open, page 973. I'll have a moment's prayer before we come to look at it together.

Father God, you've given us eyes to read these words and ears to hear about them. But we need your help to feel them and to trust them and to enjoy them and be changed by them.

So we ask, Lord, for that help now, for the good of your church and because you're a gracious God. Amen. Well, very few of the Bible's words make me squirm.

Like those times, Jesus looked his disciples in the eye and talked about them running from him in shame. whoever's ashamed of me and my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he

comes in his Father's glory.

I think those words make me uncomfortable because I know that if I'm honest, human opinions matter far too much to me. I can all too easily picture myself denying Jesus just like Peter in front of the servant girl on that first Easter night.

[5 : 18] I think of all the gospel opportunities I've flunked, the chances to come clean about being a Christian that I've blown. My shame tends to come flooding back when I think about the things I've not said, the times I've avoided Jesus' name.

Probably that's because it's hard to imagine a situation where I'd openly contradict the gospel. I don't live in fear of a gun being held to my head. I'm not attracted to the liberal gospel. Or the prosperity gospel. Or any of those explicit denials of Jesus' message. But I wonder if that might just make me a little bit complacent.

Because there are ways I can be ashamed of Jesus without avoiding his name or changing my doctrine. And as much as I might squirm at my failure to speak up about Christ, I wonder if I could have a blind spot for all the statements I make about the gospel when I don't even realize that I'm saying a word.

Well, tonight, Paul's letter moves on to what seems like the most mundane setting you could possibly imagine. A church lunch somewhere in the big cosmopolitan city of Antioch.

[6 : 37] And yet, in our first few verses, we find that Peter, or Kephas, that great, courageous apostle, publicly denies the Lord Jesus for the second time in his life.

Not this time with a big, dramatic betrayal, like the night Jesus was arrested. No, this time he does it without saying a thing. All it took was moving tables.

Sitting with one group of Christians instead of a slightly less kosher group of Christians. That's what Peter did. And yet, whatever that involved, and however good his motives probably were, it was such a serious betrayal that Paul says he stood condemned.

That's a weighty word to throw around, isn't it? Especially when you're talking about an apostle condemned. So for all its trivial appearances, what we're looking at tonight was nearly the most catastrophic moment in the history of the church.

The day that the cross was undone over a church lunch. And it happened because a thoroughly orthodox, evangelical Christian like Peter acted in a way that denied the gospel.

[7 : 58] He sent a message that undermined his teaching. So although back in Jerusalem, up in verse five, Peter and Paul stood side by side defending the truth of the gospel, by verse 14, look, it's the truth of the gospel Peter's denying.

Same phrase, do you see that? Not by teaching it falsely, but by walking out of step with it. And Paul tells this story to the church in Galatia because he knows how easy it is to make the same mistake.

He sees Christians there under just the same pressure as Peter. And in that situation, it is so easy to let what you do with your lives betray the things you say with your lips.

So first, Paul tells them the story. And then from verse 15, he lets them listen into why Peter's mistake was such a serious contradiction of his doctrine.

And that second half of the passage will be just the gospel medicine the Galatian church needed for themselves. First, though, we've got to travel back to Antioch, haven't we, and learn from Peter's mistake.

[9 : 11] And that's what verses 11 to 14 are all about. The lives that betray our lips. And to be fair to Peter, I think we need to appreciate that he was in a pretty difficult situation.

So in case we think we are more brave or more sound than the apostle, it's worth thinking carefully about the pressure he was under. And to do that, we've got to do our best to reconstruct the scene without taking too many leaps beyond the text.

But there are certain things we know for sure, aren't there? We know that in the beginning, when Peter arrived in Antioch, his practice was to treat everyone in that church in just the same way.

Verse 14 says, he lived like a Gentile, not like a Jew. And remember, that was a pretty extraordinary thing for an Israelite. It wasn't just a matter of the seating plan.

And sitting down at a table together with a Gentile believer meant sharing all the same food, eating out of the same bowls and drinking from the same cups.

[10 : 19] And because we human beings are relational creatures, food is never just food. Now, I've got to confess to a bit of weirdness here because I'm one of those odd people whose perception of

normality has been warped forever by incarceration as a child in a posh public school.

But growing up in an institution did at least teach me one thing. It's that food is very, very important. It's not just for filling your stomach.

No, food changes everything. The people who sit down at the same table as you are your friends.

And the people who don't, well, if you're a schoolboy, they might as well be mortal enemies.

And there are two commodities which keep the whole strange public school system running. One of those is toast and the other is pasta. Almost every night, one boy will push his cookery skills to the limit by making a massive pot of mushy pasta and pouring cheap tomato sauce over the top.

But the most important thing to remember in a British public school is this. eating off proper crockery is a definite sign of weakness. The correct procedure is to sit on the floor around a big saucepan with a fork in your hand and the seven or eight boys who eat out of that same pan, those boys are brothers.

[11 : 48] Now I know there are few people on this planet as weird as boarding school boys, but the truth which holds for them holds for everyone. Food is never just about food.

The people we sit down with are important people to us. A meal changes a relationship every time. Eating the Lord's Supper, for example, isn't just some random ceremony that someone thought up. There was a reason for that. There's a reason that we share the same meal and share the same cup. It says something profound about the family, doesn't it? And Peter knew that that was a big deal.

Three times, remember, God showed him that extraordinary vision of bacon butties and other delicious pagan food being lowered from heaven. And it took a while for the message to sink in, but when it did, Peter was the first apostle to defend his Gentile brothers and sisters.

Earlier in this chapter, he was right there alongside Paul fighting for that same message. So what changed so suddenly that day in Antioch?

[12 : 55] Well, verse 12 tells us about what are probably two separate groups of people, although it's hard to be sure. First, there are certain men come from James, presumably messengers he'd sent or at least people claiming to represent him.

And we know that previously, James was on just the same page as Peter and Paul. So it's hard to know quite what the message they brought was. Perhaps they just had news from the church back in Jerusalem.

But obviously that news worried Peter. And my guess is that it was news about the other group mentioned in verse 12, the circumcision party, or more literally just those of the circumcision.

That's a phrase which sometimes means Christian Jews or quite often just means Jewish people in general. Perhaps they're the same people as James' messengers. But notice Paul doesn't say that. He doesn't say that James' messengers are the circumcision party. They could be two separate groups. I think they probably are. What Paul does tell us is that Peter is very afraid of this circumcision group.

[14 : 04] And that rather makes me think that it's a wider threat than simply a faction within the church. Because Peter's stood up to false teaching within the church plenty of times by now, hasn't he?

It sounds to me like those of the circumcision are people making life very difficult for ordinary Jewish Christians. And if word was getting around that over in Antioch, a prominent Christian like Peter was corrupting himself with the Gentiles, that pressure on Jewish Christians back home was only going to get harder.

And maybe that was all James' messengers came to say, that people were starting to talk. But now Peter knows that whatever his principles, how he behaves in Antioch has consequences for Jewish believers everywhere.

And how would Peter's little Jewish church hold up to that pressure? Suddenly they'd find households close to them, religious parents shunning their Christian children.

Perhaps their jobs taken away, even violence. And all Peter has to do as their tender-hearted, pragmatic pastor is to keep up a little veneer of Jewish religion.

[15 : 24] and all the pressures off. Not say anything different, not compromise the cross in his teaching, just move across to the kosher table.

And so that's what Peter did. And one by one, the others followed him. Even kind old Barnabas, the encourager. Now you can understand Peter's bind, can't you?

Was it really such a bad decision? But Paul's response is that that was sheer hypocrisy. And the rest of the passage will explain why it denies everything Jesus achieved at the cross.

But just notice here what a big deal Paul makes of it. He puts Peter in just the same camp as the false brothers we met up in verse 4. It's the truth of the gospel he's out of step with.

And although Peter probably never spoke a word of different doctrine, look what he's charged with in verse 14. He's charged with forcing something on the Gentiles.

[16:28] The same word that Paul used at the false teachers in Jerusalem earlier on. Even though Peter's preaching hadn't changed, the message he was communicating had become a different gospel.

His behavior was saying the cross isn't quite enough. You've made a good start, but if you want to become properly accepted, you need to become like us Jews.

Well, let's pause for a moment before we move on to Paul's response and just draw a few applications. And I think we need to admit that this particular cocktail of nationalistic tension and religious pride and Peter's genuine fear for other Jewish Christians was a fairly unique historical situation.

we're unlikely to find direct parallels to apply that to today. But it's not so much the cause of Peter's behavior that matters as the consequences of what he did.

What he did was create two classes of Christians. Ones who are okay to have about church and the ones who are good enough to have in your home. Good enough to sit down to lunch to.

[17:43] And that pushes what Jesus had done in making these Christians acceptable right out of the center of church life. Without meaning to, Peter had marginalized the cross.

And that is something we do anytime we belittle other Christians. Christians. If we make other believers feel inadequate or ungodly or somehow not quite as spiritual as we are, we're rubbishing Jesus and his cross.

Look at verse 21. If righteousness comes by keeping the right laws or saying the right things or dressing the right way, then in effect Christ died for nothing.

even if we don't say the words, what we're doing with that behavior is forcing our own standards on somebody that Christ made part of the family.

Push his cross to one side like that and all sorts of ugly behavior will creep into the church. Well, tonight's an amazing night for the Tron, isn't it?

[18:53] It's 50 new people, I think, all taking their place here in the church family. And although most of these brothers and sisters sitting in these front free rows come from a very different culture, all of them have come through the same Lord Jesus.

So it's important that tonight the rest of us here ask ourselves what exactly are we demanding of our new members? Is it to get stuck in alongside us serving the same Lord or is it to become like us, Scottish and middle class and using all the same Christian jargon that we use?

Now, most evenings our Farsi speakers sit downstairs, don't they? And I guess most of us here rightly feel a little bit uncomfortable about that, that separation.

If we don't, we probably should be feeling a bit uncomfortable about it. In the end, though, what matters is the effect that our behavior is having on each other.

And the whole purpose of holding a Farsi service downstairs is to make people as included as they possibly can be, isn't it? We want everyone to share in the same teaching, that's why we do it.

[20:09] It's to include people, not to shut them out. But what if after the service, we didn't make any effort to get to know people in the other group?

That would be slightly Galatian behavior, wouldn't it? What if the people we invite home to lunch on a Sunday are always the exciting people, the students or the ministry trainees or the ones who we find it easy to get on with?

That's a little Galatian, isn't it? It's separating the church into little factions. Christians. What if the only Christians out there we really trusted were the ones in our little group who listened to our sort of preacher and talked our sort of language and studied in our sort of training programs?

What are we forcing on people before we'll accept them? Maybe you've been on the other end of that. Maybe something about the group you belong to, isn't quite authentic enough for someone else.

The preaching's not real enough, the worship's not intimate enough, or the labels aren't reformed enough. It hurts to be shut out, doesn't it? We might not find exact parallels to Peter's situation, but

we can all too easily have the same effect on each other, can't we?

[21 : 39] Well, two other little things to recognize before we move on. One is that Peter's motivation was very understandable, but that's why the need to please people and the fear of meeting human expectations is such a dangerous thing.

It's why right from the start of chapter one, Paul was so clear about serving Jesus Christ and not any man. But if I'm honest with myself, I can quite easily recognize that need for others to think well of me.

And if that's something you can recognize too, then we also need to recognize the dangerous places that that need can lead us. Whether we're the ones doing the belittling or whether we're the ones feeling belittled, often it's not really God's acceptance that we're worrying about, is it?

Really, we're afraid of each other. We're driven by the need to impress each other. And that is a dangerous need. It's one that can do real damage to gospel relationships.

And lastly, the thing about this whole scene, which personally I find the most chilling, and that is how disastrous Peter's behavior was for the other Jewish Christians, the very people that he was probably trying to protect.

[23 : 06] One by one, verse 13, every one of them followed his example and put their lives out of step with their lips.

You end up with a sort of group think which denies the cross. So we might not realize that we're setting an example, but our sin affects everyone who notices it.

And that is a serious challenge, especially for those of us who teach or hold sway in a group of friends. What I do when the service is over can undermine everything I say when I'm standing up here.

Our behavior affects each other, doesn't it? Something that we need to recognize. Before long, if that gets into the church culture, people out there will begin to see through our church, won't they? The Tron, yep, they're a great Bible teaching church, just not very loving. And with that, all of our historic ministry, our public stand for the truth, all of that goes out the window.

[24 : 14] So that Paul would say, well, they talk the talk, but their hearts seem a long way from my gospel. Now friends, none of us want that, do we?

So let's remember that this letter was written in love. And what comes next should really help and encourage us to keep walking in step with what we believe.

For the rest of the chapter, it's as if Paul lets us listen in to his rebuk to Peter. It's a reminder of all the theology that Peter taught but had pushed to the side when the pressure was on.

The talk that should shape our walk. That's verses 15 to 21 then. The talk that should shape our walk. And really, the argument here is very simple.

He starts with what everyone in this situation agreed on. Peter, Paul, James, everyone. Everyone agrees, verse 16, that the Christian life begins with faith in Jesus Christ and nothing more.

[25 : 19] Now that's a clever way to argue, isn't it? Peter, you and I both know fine well that it's Jesus who justifies a person, makes him righteous and acceptable before God.

That's why you and I have both believed in him and trusted him, even though we were proud Jews with all our laws and customs. We know, don't we, Peter, that really we are no better than these Gentile sinners.

He says it three times there, doesn't he? It's not works of the law which make us right, our obedience, or our Jewishness, or our anything. That's what we all agree on.

Our acceptance with God depends on Jesus. But then from verse 17 to the end, he moves on to what Peter seems to be forgetting, that not only is Christ the start of the Christian life, but it's Christ right to the end of the Christian life.

When you become a Christian, Jesus doesn't simply give you a clean sheet and leave you to get on with it. No, he gives you himself. He makes his home inside you.

[26 : 31] And that makes all the difference in the world to how we understand holiness and growth and what it means to be a proper believer. Now, it's a dense paragraph, so let me step through it as simply as I can.

Remember that the heart of what these troublemakers were arguing was that once you've trusted Jesus, you need to go back to Jewish law to become properly acceptable to God and to each other, to control your sin and to grow in godliness.

You need rules. And that's why these customs mattered so much to them. And to people like that, Peter and Paul were simply giving in to sin by turning away from Judaism.

That's the allegation in verse 17, isn't it? Jesus is just promoting their sinfulness. So what Paul shows, Peter, is that really these troublemakers have it all back to front.

By going back to Judaism, by putting up barriers between Jesus' people like food and circumcision, actually they'd be violating everything the law stood for.

[27 : 43] God's law was really about love and real heart righteousness. That's what Paul's going to show later on in the letter. So by rebuilding all that religion, now that Jesus has fulfilled it, they'd actually be transgressing the very heart of God's law.

It wouldn't be loving, would it? What believers need is a better answer to godly living, an answer that starts not with rules, but with Jesus.

And that's what Paul begins to lay out here. Through the law, verse 19, under the law's punishment, Jesus the Messiah died for his people.

And because I belong to him, because I'm united to him, I died that day as well. which means not only was our curse taken, but we died to the whole sinful human approach of trying to please God by keeping the rules.

For Jesus' people, a whole age died on that day, what he called the present evil age, back at the start of the letter, the age marked by our sinful human approach to God's law, which used rules as the answer to sin and winning God's love.

[29 : 08] That approach to the law only earns us death. And we died to that approach the day Jesus took our sentence. But being joined to him gives us a whole new way to face life and acceptance, an approach all about Jesus setting the agenda, his spirit changing our hearts and urging us to keep on trusting him for our growth and our godliness.

It's no longer I who live, verse 20, but Christ who lives in me, Christ's spirit. Because Jesus didn't simply give us a clean sheet, he gave us himself, living in us day by day and pulling us back to his cross, putting us back to his costly way of living, loving each other and putting others first.

So Paul says, here's the secret, verse 20, here's the secret to life in this awkward age. Here's how to grow and please God. The life I now live here in the flesh while I struggle on, I live by the faithfulness of the Son of God.

I trust him who loved me, who gave himself to win my acceptance. The only way on in the Christian life is that patient, humble walk in Christ's spirit, the spirit who urges us to trust and put each other first.

And any other answer, any trick to holiness that demands more to make me acceptable, makes his life and death a waste of breath.

[31 : 02] Now that will be the way the argument works right the way through the letter. Having begun by Jesus, there's no way to grow by going back. There's nothing more we should be forcing on each other.

The Christian life is a life of walking patiently with Christ day by day, living in faith that he has done enough. Now that has to be more than just talk, doesn't it?

It changes the way we struggle with ourselves, and more importantly, it changes how we'll struggle with each other. For ourselves, it's got to mean real gospel thankfulness, hasn't it?

We can live through our failures and our struggles, knowing that we were loved long ago, long before we ever knew it. But more importantly, it has to mean great gospel generosity towards each other.

These Christians you most struggle to get on with are the people Jesus loved and he bled for and he's fighting inside today. And to belittle them and look down your nose at them is to reject the power of his spirit to make us right and whole.

[32 : 22] That's what it looks like when we walk out of step with Jesus gospel. But to walk in Christ's spirit means to love Jesus' people for what Jesus has done for them.

I nullify his grace when I nullify other Christians. But the more I can make of Jesus' people, the more I start to make of Jesus' cross.

Let's pray. It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by the faithfulness of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

Lord God, how sharply we feel that our lives are out of step with your gospel so often. And yet we can thank you, dear Father, because although we fall so short, we live by the faith of your Son.

So we pray, Lord, that more and more your spirit of love and grace would control our hearts, that our church will be and our homes would truly be testimonies to the power of Jesus' cross.
[33 : 53] For we ask it in his precious name. Amen.