

Life Application Notes

Galatians 2:11-21 - 7th March 2021

This week's passage is a fun one! Having spent the last chapter and a half primarily building the case for his credibility as an Apostle, Paul is no longer going to hold back any punches. In this passage, we finally get to hear Paul explain the Gospel he preaches - which makes this text one of the most foundational in Christian history.

- **Read Galatians 2:11-21 together**

This evening, we're going to focus on vv. 15-17, so we're going to have to go through vv. 11-14 quite quickly - however, they're worth a more in depth study on your own, if you're interested.

Verses 11-14: In these verses, Paul challenges Peter in public about his hypocritical actions. Having previously established that his Gospel comes from God and not man, Paul is not afraid to challenge even the mighty Peter when he got it wrong.

- **What does this teach us about even mature Christians and sin and error?**
 - They still make mistakes, they can still be led astray, and they can still sin
- **What does this teach us about the effect of our error on others?**
 - People imitate others' behaviour - particularly if those people appear more mature or further along in their Christian walk. And all of us know people who are less far along on that path (or will do very soon!)

This public rebuke contrasts with the general principle taught by Jesus in Matt 18:15-17.

Read Matt 18:15-17. There's no suggestion that Peter refused to listen to Paul in private - in fact by stating that Peter's actions were hypocritical, he implies that Peter really agreed with him but was acting out of fear.

- **So why did Paul rebuke Peter publicly?**
 - It seems likely that it was because he was leading other - even very mature - Christians astray, necessitating public correction.

It is worth remembering that this doesn't seem to have caused a rift between Paul and Peter - in later letters they both refer to each other favourably. Paul also doesn't suggest that Peter is one of the accursed teachers from Gal. 1 or a false brother from earlier in Gal. 2 - he was being a hypocrite, and needed to repent of that, but his status as a Christian doesn't seem to have been in question at all. This episode appears to have been included to make it clear that Peter would agree with the argument Paul was making - gentiles were not to be forced to live like Jews. And in the next verses, Paul lays out why.

Verses 15-21: These verses are rich, dense, and important - so we'll take them a little slower.

Verse 15: Jews believed that they inherited a special status through God's covenants with Abraham and Moses. (More on Abraham in future weeks.) They had been given the law, and everyone else (gentiles) were lawless - and because they were lawless, necessarily sinners.

- **Can you begin to see flaws in this argument? (Consider Rom. 2:14-16)**

Verse 16: This is the first time we see the word “justified” used in this letter - it’s a word that Paul uses a lot throughout his epistles, so it’s worth making sure you know what it means.

- **Does anyone know what it means?**
 - In this context it’s a legal term meaning “declared righteous” - i.e. equivalent to an innocent verdict in a court of law.

The ‘we’s in this verse and the previous one would appear to refer to Paul and Peter, so again Paul is highlighting the equivalence between the Gospel he preaches, and the Gospel preached by Peter. They believe that one is “not justified by works of the law”.

- **What are “works of the law”?**
 - Trying to earn your righteousness by doing good things.

Instead we are justified “by faith in Jesus Christ”. This is a fairly complicated and important phrase - and no doubt we will come back to it in future weeks. However:

- **What does this phrase mean to you at this stage?**
 - N.B. This is going to be a deeper topic in future weeks, so don’t feel like you need to spend too much time answering it completely here.

Verse 17: In v. 17, Paul appears to be addressing a similar objection as in Rom. 6, though he comes at it from a slightly different angle. If God is encouraging people to be justified by faith and not by works, doesn’t that mean God is encouraging people to sin?

- **If God is holy, how could he allow us to go on sinning?**
 - Firstly, because we still bear responsibility for our sin - not God. (To be clear, you can’t get this just from this particular text. However, if you don’t hold this to be true then you can apply the same logic to say that God, who created humans, would have to bear the responsibility for all human sin - which clearly doesn’t mesh with what the rest of Scripture tells us about sin and human responsibility.)
 - Secondly, because Jesus died on the cross - Paul will explain this more clearly in Gal. 3.

Verse 18: This can be one of the harder verses to understand in this passage. It would seem to suggest that Paul considers any attempt to return to relying on works as intrinsically sinful - i.e. if it is God’s will that people are to be saved through faith, then to attempt to do otherwise is outside of God’s will, and by definition sinful.

Verses 19 & 20: Verse 19 and Verse 20 mirror each other, and have been described as the crux of Paul’s argument in his letter to the Galatians. Verse 18 has already explained what dying to the law is all about.

- **What, then, do you think Paul means by “living to God”?**
- **Is this the same as what is meant by “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me?”**
 - I think there’s an interesting subtlety here - we are justified by our faith in Christ and by his sacrifice, and take on his righteousness (v.20), but we are

now also called to a more profound relationship with him because of that (v.19).

Verse 21: “Cosmic child-abuse” is a criticism that has been levelled (incorrectly) against the doctrine of penal substitution (Christ dying for our sins), arguing that God couldn’t possibly punish Christ for our sins without being evil - and therefore that such an interpretation of Scripture must be wrong.

- **What does v.21 (and the end of v.20) tell us about this?**
 - If Jesus dying on the cross wasn’t an act of penal substitution, then Paul says there was no point. If penal substitution isn’t true, then we still have to earn our way into heaven (or accept some equally unbiblical doctrines, such as universalism).
- **From what you’ve read in Galatians so far (and elsewhere in Scripture), do you believe that Christ died for your sins? Based on this passage, what does that mean for you?**

Context for leaders *Jewish distinctiveness in the 1st century*

A foundational part of Jewish belief is that they are a nation chosen by God, and set apart from the rest of humanity as his possession - the apple of his eye (Deut 32:10). This is clearly a view we now hold of ourselves as Christians - we are the heirs of this promise (more on that in later weeks). In contrast to Christianity, however, Judaism is not - on the whole - an evangelistic religion, and has not managed to survive the millenia by convincing others to join the cause. Instead, it has survived by erecting clear boundaries between itself and outsiders - gentiles - and by avoiding influences that may have diluted Jewish identity. In the first century, these boundaries would have been most clearly demarcated by three practices: observing the sabbath in a particular way, circumcising males, and complying with food purity laws. It is notable that early Christianity repudiated all three of these practices, breaking down the barriers between Jew and gentile.