The Gospel Creates Unity
Galatians 2:11-14

Title
Reading and teaching from the NLT
This week is a message for Christians—Next week would be a good week to bring friends

The problem presented in the book of Galatians is this:

- In the Apostle Paul's absence certain men have crept in who are teaching that though the Gospel is the way to start the Christian life (I.e. how we are saved), it is not the way to continue the Christian life
- If one wants to be a **'Good Christian'** and maintain a **'good standing'** before God **daily**, then one must do the right things.
    - From their perspective the right things were to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses
- They knew Paul taught the Gospel means we are **daily accepted** and **daily approved of** by God regardless of what we **do or fail to do**, because of what Jesus has done for us (once we accept that in faith)
    - So, what they did was cast aspersion on both Paul's Apostleship and his message—they said he was a second hand apostle who had gotten his message second hand and then confused it
- So, in Galatians, Paul defends both his Apostleship and his message by saying that he got both of them from Jesus Himself! (see 1:1&12)
    - And that the original Apostles **confirmed** both his calling and his message **(= last week)**

We ended last week with this realization:

- That Peter—who affirmed Paul's calling and message (see 1:6&9) would never add to the Gospel, that in order to be **daily accepted** by God we need to **daily perform** well—there is just no way!
    - (After all, Peter was the one who denied Christ 3 times on the day of His crucifixion and had then been restored a few days later—not because he performed better, but because of what Jesus had done on the Cross)

Here is what we discover in today's text that is so interesting:

- That when it came to issues of **identity** and **acceptance, inclusion and exclusion** (which we all struggle with daily), Peter was willing to act in a way that was **inconsistent** with what he truly believed about the Gospel and its implications
    - I.e. Though he believed that everyone was accepted by God strictly on the basis of the Cross of Christ and by grace (and so we should accept one another one that basis), he occasionally acted as though there were something better in performing a certain way
    - I.e. In being a 'Good Christian'

What Peter's actions are representative of is our proclivity to **hold ourselves aloof from** other Christians who don't **'measure up'** in our minds for one reason or another

- Peter's motive may have been different slightly different in that he did it in response to a sort of **'peer pressure'**
- But it is indicative of the same **root problem**: **We sometimes value classing/locating people, over the relational implications of the Gospel**

Let's look to the text and see how all this unfolds—

©2011 Britt Merrick

Paul is recounting an actual confrontation that took place between him and Peter in Antioch

- SHOW MAP (Located on page 6 and attached as separate file)
- Antioch (still a major town of south-central Turkey) is about 300 miles away from Jerusalem, was the 3rd largest city in the Roman empire n the 1st C. It was one of the great early centers of Christianity and the first place where the followers of Jesus were ever called Christians (Messiah-people). **Paul and Barnabas had spent a year there** (Acts 11:26)
- The reason Paul brings this confrontation up is not to shame Peter, but to show that his version of the Gospel is **authoritative enough** to even correct the Apostle Peter
    - The implication being, Paul has the one true Gospel message to communicate and not some distortion of it
    - A point we may glean from this may be, no Christian is above the call to "follow the truth of the gospel message" in how we live, and especially how we live in **relation to one another**

Verse 11

- But = In contrast to Peter **agreeing with** Paul's message (in the previous passage)
    - Even though Peter knew the Gospel and he (of all people) understood life was all by grace according to what Jesus has done for us and not something we have done or failed to do ourselves, **there was an inconsistency in his behavior**
- For what he **did** was very wrong = it wasn't an issue of conviction but action; not of belief but behavior
    - **Our behavior is not always consistent with our beliefs, is it?**
- I had to oppose him to his face = Paul was willing to confront the great Apostle Peter because of the truth that was at stake
    - **Because it is what we do (not necessarily what we believe) that has the most profound affect**

So, what did Peter do that was very wrong?

Verse 12

- When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile Christians, who were not circumcised
    - Gentile = any one who is not an **ethnic** Jew. Gentile Christian = a Christian who is not from the Jewish race
    - Who were not circumcised = they did not observe the Jewish Law (Paul = they don't need to)
- Religious Jews would not generally eat with Gentiles who were not circumcised
    - There are 2 general reasons: (1) The Law and (2) the cultural value of eating together
        - **(1) The Law:** Forbidden foods, contaminated pots, plates etc. These would make the Jew 'unclean'
        - **(2) Eating together:** It is hard for most of us to understand how big of a deal this was in that ancient culture
            - You get a glimpse of it in the Gospels where the religious leaders are appalled at the fact that Jesus **ate with** drunkards and prostitutes and tax-collectors and sinners.
            - You see, eating with someone was one of the most powerful symbols of **association** and **identification**.
            - We don't think of it this way, we will eat with people from work or school that we barely know. When we have people over for dinner we do not ask them about their ethnic or religious background before we'll have them.
            - But, it wasn't that long ago that we could relate to this directly in our society. Our parents remember separate restrooms, drinking fountains and eating areas for people of other backgrounds in this country! And if you crossed that boundary it was taboo and could be a radical statement of **association** and **identification.**

©2011 Britt Merrick

- That is sort of what was going on here, though the motivation was not so much pure racism (though it certainly crossed into that for the Jews at times)

- The motivation had more to do with who was '**in or out**' according to **behavior** "Did you observe the Law or not, and were you circumcised to prove it?"

Circumcision touches on this of issue(s) of identity and inclusion and rejection

- What we look to do is find easy ways to identify who is "in" and who is "out"
- We want to **locate ourselves** in relation to others and know who our **tribe or family** is
- = The **question of identity**—not only knowing who you are, but who else belongs in your group (not bad unless…)
- We practice **inclusion** or **exclusion** according to identity & identifying factors
  - For Jews, circumcision settled identity (males on the 8th day)
    - It was an outward sign that they were in a relationship with God
    - It was always supposed to represent a deeper reality—circumcision of the heart (see Deut 30:6; Rom 2:29; Col 2:11-12)
    - But, external observances are always easier than true heart and life transformation
- The reason that circumcision became sort of that identifying thing for the Jews was that it was hard to always know exactly who was keeping the Law…
  - Partly because there were long running debates as to exactly what it looked like to keep the Law
  - But circumcision was clear cut (no pun intended)
    - **You knew who was in and who was out…**

This was the sort of antiquated, Gospel-nullified thinking that Peter was falling prey to

- The Gentile Christians were clearly not circumcised, so they were clearly "out"

Verse 12b = When some friends of James came, Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore. He as afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision

- Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore
  - **Peter was now refusing to partake in that expression of fellowship, acceptance and inclusion**
  - **Falling to peer-pressure and the fear of man, Peter is functioning purely according to the old rules of exclusion (and not the truth of Gospel—which is always inclusionary)**

Verse 13

- As a result = Peter's actions had an affect on the rest of the body (as is always true)
- Other Jewish Christians followed Peter's **hypocrisy**
  - Hypocrisy = When we go to see a performance, a play or a movie, the actors are transformed by makeup and wardrobe
    - This was not the case in this in this ancient culture (not as advanced)
    - They would hold a mask in front of their face. Crude, but it helped the audience get the idea that the actor was pretending to be someone they were not… these actors were called hypocrites
    - The word came to be used not just to denote 'an actor' but anyone who was **pretending** to be someone or something they are not; **someone playing a part**
    - **Peter was playing a part—His actions did not square with his convictions**

©2011 Britt Merrick

Verse 14

- Peter wasn't being **true to his convictions** about the Gospel and how it freed him from having to do those things
- They were **not following** the truth of the gospel message
  - Literally = they were not walking straightly (NASB = not straightforward about the truth of the gospel)

What they were doing, holding themselves aloof from other Christians for no good reason, and refusing to accept into fellowship people that God had accepted into fellowship…

- **Wasn't squaring with the Gospel**
- It was **straightforward**—it was **crooked** (so to speak)
- They were veering from (not following) the truth of the Gospel

The Gospel, when followed, always creates unity among Christians

- The old markers of who is 'in/out' are meaningless now
- We have all been brought into fellowship with God and one another by the Gospel
  - What binds us together is greater than anything that could ever threaten to separate us
- **To break fellowship with other believers (for no good, biblical reason) is to deny the Gospel and be a hypocrite!**
  - **It is a serious sin!** (Hence Paul's public confrontation of Peter)

We commit this sin in different ways as Christians all the time—this breaking of fellowship

- The issue for us is not circumcision
- It is things like Calvinism; when the rapture happens; style of worship music; Bible translations; the gifts of the Spirit
- And even lesser things: Does a Christian dance, dress a certain way, drink alcohol, like certain music
- We are not talking about sin issues (there are times when we separate according to Scripture[1])
- We are not talking about the core, essential truths of Christianity (we may separate there)
- We are talking about **lesser issues** of **perspective** or **preference**
  - **That may have been meaningful before…**
  - **But are nullified by the Gospel**

When we do this we are creating 2 classes of Christians (which Galatians is opposed to!)

- Galatians 3:26-28

  26 For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus.
  27 And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes.
  28 There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.

It was not wrong for Peter (as a Jew) to observe the dietary laws

- It was wrong if he did so in thinking that it gained merit before God
- He was wrong if he broke fellowship with other Christians who did not

There may be certain (non-sin) behaviors that we can either do or not do according to our own convictions (or understanding of Scripture)

- But, the moment we assign merit to those behaviors and create another class for Christians who differ on those preferences or perspectives—we sin
- We are "not following the truth of the gospel" (v. 14)

[1] See for example Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:9-13

©2011 Britt Merrick

Birds of a feather will flock together, and that is okay (explain)

- **But, it is a heart issue**
- If you are rejecting someone according to their failure to perform according to what you consider to be 'good Christianity' **then you are the sinner—you have failed!**

When we do this, we are essentially creating a 'good Christian/bad Christian' dichotomy—that God does not create!

That is the big point... **you are doing something God refuses to do**

- Do you think that when we get to heaven God will say, "Okay, Pre-tribbers over here, Calvinists over here, holy-rollers you too, organ and cello music only over here... the rest of you over there in 'lesser-heaven'"
- We are making value calls that are of no ultimate value to God

Hear the words of Christ in John 17:21-23 (NLT)

21 I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.
22 I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one.
23 I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me.

What achieves this unity is the Gospel

- It is only through the Gospel that we all receive the Holy Spirit and become children of God
    - **The gospel creates unity**

- What brings us into fellowship in the first place and binds us together now is way bigger than any differences we may have

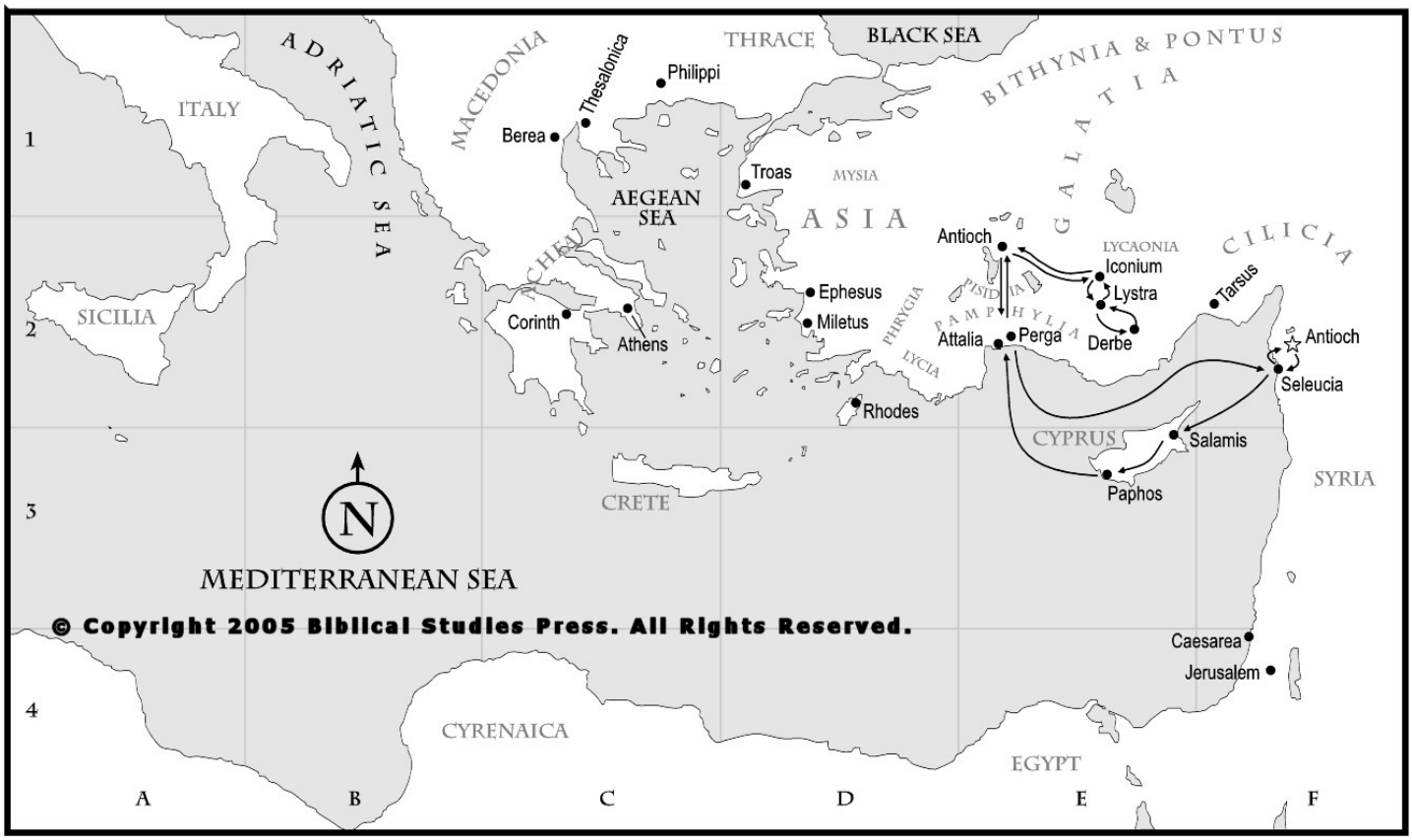
- It is not enough that we **'believe'** the Gospel, or work to **'preserve'** the Gospel, we must learn to **'apply'** the Gospel to daily life and relationships—that is what Peter failed to do

- Don't do what Peter did and create 2nd class Christians, think yourself to be better and break fellowship
    - Scripture said today: This was very wrong and not following the truth of the Gospel
    - Be true to the Gospel—don't be a hypocrite

Romans 15:5-7 (NLT)

5 May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus.
6 Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
7 Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory.

©2011 Britt Merrick



© Copyright 2005 Biblical Studies Press. All Rights Reserved.