

*Living Out the Gospel of Grace*  
*Galatians 2:11-14*

Many of you probably know that my mother is Jewish. She was raised in a Jewish home in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She came to faith in Christ when she was in her twenties. She has been an amazingly stable, consistent spiritual influence in my life. When people find out that my mother is Jewish, I get some interesting reactions. Most people just say, “Cool.” I agree. It’s really cool having a Jewish mother.

Another reaction has me a bit confused. Over the years numerous people have told me (and I have no idea why this factoid has made its way into the public consciousness), “You could serve in the Israeli army.” I never quite know what to say to this comment. I’ve never really had a desire to serve in the Israeli army. And I think it would be pretty complicated anyway (the Half-Jewish Network has a web site that clarifies these things). But that’s another reaction I’ve gotten.

On one occasion (at a wedding), I met a Jewish man who had become a Christian. When he found out that my mother is Jewish, he mentioned that he’s part of a “Messianic Congregation.” “Messianic Congregations” (broadly speaking) maintain their Jewish identity and Jewish forms of worship – much the way early followers of Jesus would have done in the first century. They celebrate the Passover, for example, in light of Jesus being the Lamb of God whose blood covers our sin. The man I talked with was quite passionate about his church, and rightly so because such forms provide a rich, meaningful way for Jewish believers to live out their faith. But I also remember his disappointment in finding out that my Jewish heritage doesn’t figure prominently in the way I express my faith. He was further disappointed to hear that I wasn’t all that interested in being coached in such things. I love the fact that my mother is Jewish, but Jewish forms of worship have never been part of my faith; for *me* they seem like an unnecessary add-on.

That encounter wasn’t a huge thing, but I did get a taste of what it might have been like for Jewish Christians in the first century to be pressured by fellow Jews to maintain their Jewish identity and Jewish customs. There were some not-so-subtle pressures for Jewish Christians to continue keeping the Jewish Law and to separate themselves from those who didn’t keep the Law (i.e. Gentiles).

Paul addresses this issue head-on in the book of Galatians. He completely rejects the idea that Jewish Christians needed to maintain Jewish social customs. He was especially concerned about the message that would be sent to Gentiles Christians if Jewish believers withdrew their fellowship out of supposed faithfulness to the Law. Today we are going to consider Galatians 2:11-14, a passage in which Paul describes how he once had to confront Peter on this very issue. Even though Peter should have known better, he had a hard time resisting the pressure to maintain his Jewish identity at the expense of fellowship with Gentiles in the Galatian church.

The issues are different for us as Christians living in the Midwest. But this passage will challenge us to consider whether we are tempted to conform to social pressures in ways that violate the gospel of grace. Specifically, this passage will challenge us to consider whether we view anybody else in the body of Christ as second-class Christians.

***A case study in abandoning the gospel of grace: Peter at Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14)***

Let's read the passage, and then we'll walk through what was happening.

11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. 13 The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

In verse 11 Paul mentions that this incident took place in Antioch. Antioch was the capital of the Roman province of Syria; it was a large, predominantly Gentile city of about half a million people. Believers from Jerusalem scattered across the Roman Empire to escape the persecution there. Some of them made their way to Antioch; but they preached the gospel only to other Jews. But other believers came from the island of Cypress and from Cyrene (in N. Africa) and began speaking to the Greeks/Gentiles. Acts 11:21 tells us that "a large number who believed turned to the Lord." This turning to the Lord by the Gentiles confirmed that the Christian movement would be much broader than Judaism; it would include Gentiles also.

When the church at Jerusalem heard that so many Gentiles had become believers in Jesus, they sent Barnabas to Antioch because he had demonstrated an ability to serve well in complicated circumstances (such as when Saul/Paul was converted). Barnabas visited Antioch and decided to go to Tarsus to find Paul so he could help. Acts 11:26 tells us:

26 and when he found him [Paul], he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

Barnabas and Paul invested deeply in the church at Antioch. Since this was one of the first predominantly Gentile churches, the health of this church was especially important. Perhaps this helps explain why Paul was so forceful in dealing with Peter in the incident recorded in Galatians 2. Look at verses 11 and 12 again:

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We don't know when Peter had been in Antioch or how long he had been there. But he had been in the habit of eating with the Gentile Christians in Antioch. This doesn't seem like a big deal to us, but in first-century Judaism this was a monumental shift of thought and behavior. Their entire identity was wrapped up in their dietary laws; what they ate and how they ate it shaped their identity.

God had already dealt very directly with Peter on this very point. Acts 10 and 11 describe in some detail how God gave Peter a vision in which he saw a sheet coming down from heaven which contained all types of animals and crawling creatures and birds (which were forbidden to be eaten in the Law). Here's what happened next (Acts 10:13-16):

13 And a voice came to him, "Arise, Peter, kill and eat!" 14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." 15 And again a voice *came* to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no *longer* consider unholy." 16 And this happened three times; and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.

Peter had never eaten anything that God had forbidden. But now God had made clear that there wasn't a list of forbidden foods. Peter could now eat anything he wanted to eat. And if it didn't matter what you ate, neither did it matter with whom you ate it. Later in Acts 10 Peter made this statement to a group of Gentiles who had requested his presence:

28 And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and *yet* God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean.

God really couldn't have dealt more directly with Peter on this matter. And yet Paul describes in Galatians 2 an incident in which Peter lapses into his old way of thinking and behaving.

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Peter's normal practice was to eat with the Gentile Christians. We don't know for sure, but Paul is probably saying that Peter not only ate with Gentiles but that he ate foods that were "unclean" (by Jewish standards). As we saw in Acts 10, Peter had full freedom in Christ to do so. What you eat and who you eat with has no bearing on your standing before God. But when "certain men from James" came, Peter quit having table fellowship with his Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ.

Who were these "men from James"? James was a key leader in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 12:1-2). It's not clear if these men accurately represented James or if they were acting on their own. In either case, when they arrived, Peter quit eating with the Gentiles because he "fear[ed] the party of the circumcision" – those at Jerusalem who demanded that Gentiles follow the Jewish Law. Peter feared what they might think about him and perhaps what they might do to him. Even though God had given him a powerful vision which unmistakably made clear that He didn't care what he ate and who he ate it with, Peter succumbed to peer pressure. Even though he knew better, he was more concerned about not upsetting fellow Jewish believers than maintaining table fellowship with the Gentile believers in Antioch. When he realized that he couldn't live out his freedom *and* please fellow Jewish believers, he chose to "pleasing men" (to use the terminology of 1:10).

Paul doesn't comment on the effect of Peter's actions on the Gentiles in the Galatian church, but it had to be incredibly hurtful to them. Peter was sending the message loud and clear, "You are second-class Christians. If you want to be first-class Christians, you need to become good Jews." In verse 13 Paul mentions that Peter's behavior influenced others:

13 The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.

The other Jewish Christians (and even Barnabas!) followed Peter's hypocrisy. The result was a church that was divided along ethnic lines: a Jewish faction and a Gentile faction. This division was intolerable (see McKnight, p. 105) to Paul in light of his conviction that in Christ there is "neither Jew nor Greek" (3:28); those categories are now obsolete in Christ.

Paul's response was to "oppose" Peter "to his face because he stood condemned" (v. 11). Perhaps Paul had already privately confronted Peter about his hypocrisy; we simply don't know. But presumably because his behavior was so public, the correction needed to be public also. Verse 14 gives us further insight into how serious Peter's error really was:

14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Peter, Barnabas, and the rest of the Jewish believers "were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel." By implying that Jewish Christians have a better standing before God than Gentile Christians, Peter's life contradicted the truth of the gospel. The truth of the gospel said that whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, you have a right standing before God through faith in Jesus Christ. By withdrawing his fellowship from Gentiles, Peter in essence "compelled the Gentiles to live like Jews" – which contradicted the gospel of Christ.

This passage suggests a couple of principles to consider. First, ***there are no second-class Christians***. When you put your faith in Jesus Christ, you are declared righteous; you are as righteous as you possibly can be; you are just as righteous before God as Jesus Himself. God doesn't show partiality or favoritism among His children. ***He doesn't play favorites***. Therefore ***we shouldn't either***. In the body of Christ, we are supposed to treat each other the way God in Christ has treated us. Therefore, we need to live with conviction that there are no second-class Christians.

The issue for us isn't Jewish Christians viewing Gentile Christians as inferior. As I've listened to other people and as I've observed my own heart, in our day Christians tend to look down on others for a variety of reasons.

- Theological position (Arminian, Reformed, Dispensational, etc.). If you're very confident about your own theological positions, it's very easy to look down on others with different convictions

- Political convictions. It's very common to look down on those who don't vote as you do because – **obviously** – they don't understand the Scriptures and what's at stake in our country and in the world.
- Sins (past or present). It's so easy to pigeon-hole people according to what we know about their "past" or their "struggles" without stopping to consider how people would think about us if they knew everything in our lives that is hidden.
- Nationality and race. I grew up in a church that gave money to send missionaries to Africa to share Christ; but when a young man from Africa who was led to Christ by the missionaries we supported came to our town to attend college and wanted to join the church, racism surfaced with a vengeance. We are blessed here at Faith to have different nationalities and races worshipping together; it's a glimpse of heaven really (Rev. 5:9-10). We need to pay close attention to our attitudes toward those whose race or nationality is different from our own.

We tend to be a lot more subtle than Peter. I doubt many of us would actually decide, "I would never eat a meal with that category of Christian. I wouldn't enter into their homes and I wouldn't have them into my home." But subtly we might write off whole categories of Christians and not seriously consider entering into relationship and share our lives with them. Paul makes clear that if you view others as second-class Christians you're not living out the true gospel of grace. We dare not have more stringent requirements for fellowship than Jesus Himself.

Second, ***the gospel of grace gives us freedom to live consistent lives.*** This is what Peter couldn't do. He had the freedom to eat with Gentiles and enjoy any food they put in front of him. But when the Jewish believers from Jerusalem arrived, he withdrew his fellowship. He caved to the social pressure of pleasing men. The same thing can happen to us. We can feel that we need to be one person around one group of Christians and another person around another group.

As you might imagine as a pastor I have relationships with a wide variety of people in the church – people with varying degrees of freedom on lots of different issues (theology, lifestyle, politics, parenting, etc.). I tend to be a person who wants everybody to love me and everybody to love everybody else. (I've come to find out that not everybody has my problem; some people have told me, "I couldn't care less what other people think." Those people have a whole different set of problems.) But as someone who wants everybody to like him, the temptation is to say and do things that will please the people you're with at the time. But that's a terribly complicated way to live your life. I've tried it; I don't like. It's not God's will for me. ***The gospel of grace gives me the freedom to live a consistent life.*** I don't have to pretend I'm something I'm not. And one of the things I love about Faith is that I hardly ever feel pressure from any of you to put on a mask and play a role. Such temptations come from within myself.

This doesn't mean that you never limit your freedoms for the good of others. In Romans 14 Paul argued that you should limit your freedom (in terms of what you eat and drink) if it will cause another believer to stumble. But that's very different than caving in to someone else's legalism. This is a complicated topic and not every issue of theology or lifestyle is clean and simple. But the default position in the NT is to respect each other's freedom to live consistent lives. Of

course we're not talking about the freedom to sin; we're talking about the freedom to follow the Spirit's leading on matters that aren't spelled out in Scripture.

Last Sunday afternoon we held a baptism service for nine people. If you were here you heard each of them tell how they come to faith in Jesus. Their stories were very different in terms of religious backgrounds and lifestyles and experiences and the ways they express their faith. I find that variety fascinating and even exhilarating. If indeed God has designed the body of Christ with this diversity, we shouldn't try to squeeze everyone into the same mold. Rather, we respect God's design by acknowledging that *the gospel of grace gives us freedom to live consistent lives*.