

Time to Reflect

- Can you think of any reasons to explain why someone would change their thinking on Christian beliefs so quickly and so easily?
- How can we stay close to God and grounded in His Word as we seek to live out our Christian faith?

Last week we reflected on the extent to which Paul sought to defend his spiritual liberty in Christ at the Jerusalem Council. We reached the conclusion that oppositions and frustrations do exist and they hinder the spread of the gospel. Yet we are not to change the gospel or deviate from it in any way. This week we see how Paul defended the gospel message as he opposed Peter. This is a dramatic passage and it leads us to reflect on the themes of justification and grace.

“Paul had risked his life to carry the gospel of God’s grace to the regions beyond, and he was not willing for the enemy to rob him or his churches of their liberty in Christ. It was this ‘spiritual vigilance’ that led Paul into another dramatic encounter, this time with the apostle Peter, Barnabas, and some of the friends of James.”

(Warren Wiersbe, *Be Free: Galatians*, p55)

Specifics

- Last week we focused on events at the Jerusalem Council. A period of time had passed since that important conference and, as we turn to our passage, we discover that Peter was in Antioch (v11). This was a Gentile city.
- What we read next in (v11) is nothing short of astonishing. Paul said, **“When Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.”** This is strong and direct language!
- What brought about this confrontation between Paul and Peter? Warren Wiersbe draws our attention to (v12-13) and what he refers to as Peter’s Relapse¹.
- When we read Acts of the Apostles, we discover that Peter enjoyed a profound freedom. He had fellowship with all the believers, Jews and Gentiles alike.
- God also gave Peter a vision to show him that His grace was available to everyone (Acts 11). In that famous passage, Peter proved that God had accepted the Gentiles. They received the same outpouring of the Holy Spirit that the Jews received after believing in God (Acts 11:17).
- Ultimately Peter issued a point of challenge and application (Acts 11:16-17). With great openness and honesty, he declared **“...who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way” (Acts 11:17).**
- As we enter this week’s passage, it appears that Peter’s position had changed and Paul moved to challenge him about this.
- Wiersbe offers us a word of warning. He writes, **“Before we criticize Peter, perhaps we had better examine our own lives and see how many familiar Bible doctrines we are actually obeying...It is one**

¹ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Free: Galatians* (David C Cook, 2009), p55.

thing for us to defend a doctrine in a church meeting, and quite something else to put it into practice in everyday life.²

- What had happened to Peter? Paul suggested that he had been gripped by fear (v12). The Church in Antioch was visited by some associates of James. They were legalistic and sought to promote a message that diluted the gospel of grace.
- This was a difficult time for Peter, an occasion when he was stretched and tested. Wiersbe suggests, “...with the arrival of some members of ‘the opposition,’ Peter lost his courage. ‘The fear of man bringeth a snare’ (Prov.29:25).³”
- Even in his earlier journey of faith, Peter was an impulsive man. Remember how he walked on water to go to Jesus and then, overcome with fear and doubts, he started to sink. He also boasted in an upper room that he would willingly die with Jesus, yet he denied his Lord three times.
- Our passage, this week, reminds us that Peter’s fear led to Peter’s fall. This is a sad situation, and one that we can all experience very easily. It can be difficult to stand resolute when faced with staunch and persistent opposition. But it is important that we do stand firm and this is Paul’s clear conviction.
- Peter’s compromise led him to be accused of hypocrisy (v13) and resulted in other people being led astray – notably Barnabas is named by Paul (v13).
- This is a powerful reminder of the need to stay close to God and remain faithfully grounded in His Word. Wiersbe reflects, “You can see that this problem was not a matter of personality or party: it was a question of ‘the truth of the gospel.’ And Paul was prepared to fight for it.⁴”
- The remainder of our passage is a record of Paul’s rebuke of Peter and it is interesting that he based everything on doctrine.

1. The Unity of the Church (v14).

- In Jerusalem, Peter declared that there was no difference between Jew and Gentile (Acts 15:9). Now he was making a difference. Paul contended that God’s true people are one people, united under God’s one true Word.

2. Justification by Faith (v15-16).

- This is central to the gospel message and reflects God’s own declaration that “The just shall live by faith” (Habakkuk 2:4). Wiersbe helpfully defines justification as “...the act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous in Jesus Christ.⁵”
- In (v16) Paul spoke clearly against justification by works and the position that Peter had adopted.

3. Freedom from the Law (v17-18).

- Peter had referred to the Law as a burdensome yolk (Acts 15:10). Now he had returned to embrace that yolk. Paul warned Peter that this was spiritual regression away from the freedom that God had given him. He was supposed to press forward and not fall back.

4. The Gospel Itself (v19-21).

- Paul challenged Peter by reflecting on a serious question that could be summarised as: *if a person is justified by the works of the Law, then why did Jesus die?* The power of the gospel is cross-shaped and we can never neglect the importance of the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary’s hill.
- There is no account of Peter’s response to Paul. However, Scripture indicates that he returned to the message that Paul professed. In fact, the word ‘grace’ is used in every chapter of 1st Peter.

² Wiersbe, *Be Free: Galatians*, p56.

³ Ibid, p56.

⁴ Ibid, p57.

⁵ Ibid, p58.