



GALATIANS: GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING
Staying in Step with the Truth of the Gospel

Galatians 2:11-14

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But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹²For 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. ¹³And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴But 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 the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Introduction

Galatians is about gospel-rooted living. The ultimate question the letter seeks to answer is how you ought to live in light of the good news that Jesus Christ has died and been raised. This is what Paul wants to unpack in this letter, and this is what we're seeking to unpack in this sermon series: gospel-rooted living.

Of course, Paul doesn't hesitate to expound the truth of the gospel—what the gospel is and what the gospel isn't. But his purpose goes beyond mere exposition; his goal is to ensure that the Galatians actually live the truth of the gospel; or, to use a phrase from today's passage, Paul wants to call them back to conduct that is in step with the truth of the gospel (cf. 2:14).

In today's passage, Paul throws the spotlight on what it means to stay in step with the truth of the gospel. But he does so not by telling us the two of three ways in which we stay in step with the truth of the gospel; that comes a little later in chapters 5-6. Instead, what he does in this passage is shows us how you can fall out of step with the truth of the gospel.

What Paul gives us here is a tragic situation that developed in his home church in Antioch, where he and his colleague Barnabas had spent much time ministering together. In short, what happened was that an entire part of the church, in fact, the majority of the church, got out of step with the truth of the gospel by falling into hypocrisy.

This is the great threat to staying in step with the truth of the gospel: hypocrisy. Your fidelity to the truth of the gospel is constantly under threat from hypocrisy. Most often when we fail to live out the truth of the gospel, what's happened is we've veered off into hypocrisy. So, in order to stay faithful to the gospel, you and I must be vigilant in our fight against hypocrisy's menacing presence.

Hypocrisy as Play-Acting

But what is hypocrisy? We certainly hear the word tossed around like a grenade quite a bit these days. And from the way the words are often used on the evening news or political talk shows, you get the impression a hypocrite is anyone who fails to live up to his or her ideals. It's someone who fails to practice what they preach. But in that case, I'm a chronic hypocrite because I never live up to my own ideals; and I suspect you don't either.

When it comes to understanding hypocrisy, we're actually helped by the etymology of the word. In antiquity, a 'hypocrite' was an actor, someone who would put on a mask and play a part in a performance. Thus, the word came to connote "the concealing of one's true character, thoughts, or feelings under a guise implying something quite different."¹ When you act hypocritically, then, you mask your true convictions and play a part that's not really yours.

Play-acting is what Paul sees Peter and the rest of the Jews doing in Antioch. They've put on a mask to cover up what they truly believe about the gospel. You see, what happened was that a delegation of people came down from Jerusalem; men from James, Paul tell us (2:12). But the arrival of this delegation caused Peter to change his behavior toward the Gentile believers in Antioch. Prior to that point, Peter and the rest of the Jews were enjoying the freedom purchased by the gospel; they were freely eating with Gentiles, even sharing in the Lord's Table together as one body in Christ. As Paul says, "For *before* certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles, *but when* they came he drew back and separated himself" (2:12). And thus Peter played the hypocrite, and the rest of the Jews with him.

You see, you're not a hypocrite for simply failing to live up to what you believe. That is sin, but it's not the particular sin of hypocrisy; that's not what Paul's accusing Peter and the others of doing. No, you're a hypocrite when you live out your gospel convictions in one situation, but then cover them up in another. That's hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy is when a believer plays the part of a non-believer. It's like playing the part in a play in which the gospel isn't real or doesn't count. It's assuming a role in a drama, where the story isn't defined by the gospel. It's when a Christian acts the part of the non-Christian. It's what Peter did in Antioch by choosing to cover up with his behavior his true convictions about the gospel.

We all understand, of course, that you can affirm something to be true and yet fail to live up to it. This is what it means to deal with our own sin and struggles. But understand, as well, that you can affirm something to be true, and yet intentionally live in a way that covers that up and makes it look like you don't believe it to be true. This is the kind of play-acting the Bible calls hypocrisy. It's a kind of treachery, like a husband who removes his wedding ring so he can play the part of a single man. It's an act of dishonesty and disloyalty.

Where are you tempted to play act, to cover up what you believe by how you live? In what situations do you find that you're putting on a mask that conceals your true convictions about the gospel or who Jesus is?

¹ Longenecker, *Galatians*, p. 76.

The Sources of Hypocrisy

There are certain kinds of situations that will tempt us to play the hypocrite. Consider Peter's situation. Why did he mask his own convictions? Because it had become expedient for him to do so; it was personally more advantageous for him. There was strong social pressure to do so. But it was more than peer pressure; fear was a motivating factor. In fact, it was the unhappy prospect of suffering that caused Peter to play act in Antioch. Notice what Paul sees in his underlying motive: "he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party" (2:12).

Peter slid into hypocrisy because of fear. He feared the so-called circumcision party, who would have taken great offense at his free interactions with Gentiles; Peter feared them because they had the ability to punish Peter for moving beyond the bounds of what was lawful for a Jew to do. Thus, Peter drew back and separated himself from the Gentiles, because he didn't want to suffer crucifixion with Christ for the sake of the Gentiles.

His crime was hypocrisy, yes; but there was an inordinate desire to people-please underneath his mask of hypocrisy. Several weeks ago, when we considered Gal. 1:10, we came to terms the truth that people-pleasers don't make good servants of Christ. Today, as we consider Gal. 2:11-14, we confront a variation of that same truth: People-pleasers do make good play-actors; they're not good servants of Christ, but they're very adept at playing the part of the non-Christian, should the circumstances call for it.

Hypocrisy is how people-pleasers try to navigate difficult social situations. They resort to putting on a mask in order to make it through an otherwise awkward situation. When you fear social ostracism, you're tempted to play the hypocrite; you're tempted to reach for the mask to cover up your true convictions when you're worried about what others might think of you if they knew who you truly were. Recognize, as well, that the more willing you are to be crucified with Christ, the less likely you are to play act around others.

Hypocrisy's Harm

You see, then, how serious hypocrisy is. It's an act of treachery. And thus it's often extremely harmful. It can be very harmful to the hypocrite himself. In fact, notice what Paul says of Peter because his hypocrisy: "he stood condemned" (2:11). Peter was liable to God's judgment, should he not repent of his hypocrisy. That's how harmful hypocrisy is to a hypocrite.

But hypocrisy is harmful to others as well. All of us probably have a sad story or two to tell about how we've been hurt by someone else's hypocrisy. For some of us, it's a mom or a dad; for others it's a youth group leader or a pastor. Religious hypocrisy is the worst kind of hypocrisy; it's the most damaging because it's the least expected and the hardest to get over.

You can think of hypocrisy as a virus. It needs human interaction to survive; indeed, it spreads and thrives on contact. And when it finds the right environment, hypocrisy can go viral and infect a whole community. This is what happened in Antioch. Notice the impact of Peter's hypocrisy: "And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy" (2:13).

Most are easily infected by hypocrisy. Most of us, like the rest of the Jews in Antioch, need just a bit of exposure and the virus will spread. However, some have built up a stronger

resistance to hypocrisy; these are people like Barnabas, who wasn't the first to be infected with the hypocrisy spreading through the church in Antioch. But, at the end of the day, even Barnabas, as Paul laments, couldn't withstand the contagion.² Even if he was not personally infected with hypocrisy, he was nevertheless impacted by it. He was, as Paul says, led astray; carried away by the strong undertow of hypocrisy at work in the church in Antioch.

So, notice the spread of hypocrisy. First, Peter, then the rest of the Jewish believers, then even Barnabas. But recognize, as well, that hypocrisy's impact wouldn't have stopped there; it not only harmed the Jewish believers, but it would have doubtless also impacted the Gentiles. In fact, as Paul says, Peter's hypocrisy is so powerful that it's in effect forcing Gentiles to live like Jews (2:14).

Realize, then, the power of your hypocrisy to harm others. Playing the hypocrite is doing more than setting a bad example; your hypocrisy and mine can actually compel others to stray from the truth of the gospel.

There's a sobering challenge in all of this for parents. Moms and dads, you are the key influencers in your homes. So beware of playing the hypocrite there. Although no one from work or church will see your play-acting, your children certainly will. And they may even feel compelled to do what they ought not to do because of your hypocrisy.

There's also a sobering challenge here for everyone who names the name of Christ. For when you and I play the hypocrite and act like there's no gospel, not only we can infect other Christians and cause them to do the same, but we can also impact non-Christians and cause them to miss out on the gospel.

Staying in Step with the Truth of the Gospel

The truth of the gospel is a balance beam. Your task is to stay on it. But there's the world outside you, the people around you, and the sin within you. And together these forces are constantly pulling at you, tempting you to lean in one direction or another and thus fall out of step with the truth of the gospel. How, then, do you keep your balance and stay in step with the truth of the gospel?

First, look straight ahead. Don't look down. That will only cause your mind to think about falling rather than staying on. Don't anxiously worry about falling into hypocrisy. Instead, fix your gaze straight ahead, upon that single point out in front of you. And that point is Jesus Christ. Don't look around from side to side, checking out who's in the audience, what expressions they have on their faces, whether they're smiling or frowning at you. That will only mess you up and cause you to lose your balance. Instead, fix your gaze intently on the one whose smile you truly long to see. Seek to be pleasing to him rather than being a pleaser of everyone else.

Second, hold out your arms. This is how you stay balanced. But when it comes to staying in step with the truth of the gospel, hold out your arms not just for balance, but for help. Don't you

² Note the insightful comment by Longenecker, *Galatians*, p. 76: "The pathos that reverberates in the expression $\kappa\alpha\iota\ \text{Barnaba}\ \delta\epsilon$ ("even Barnabas") is gripping, for Barnabas had been Paul's advocate at Jerusalem (cf. Acts 9:26-28), mentor at Antioch (cf. Acts 11:25-30), and esteemed colleague in the evangelization of Cyprus and Southern Galatia (cf. Acts 13:2-14:26)."

remember that this was the way we first learned to walk the balance beam? You had a buddy on the right and left holding your hands, helping you stay in step with the beam itself. Staying in step with the truth of the gospel is like that. We need each other. Sometimes we need another brother or sister to grab us and keep us from falling headlong into hypocrisy; but most of the time we need others who know us to speak truth into our lives. As you hold out your arms to maintain your balance, do you have people like that?

Third, trust that you'll stay on. Fixating on how narrow the balance beam is only sets you up for failure. The worst thing an Olympic gymnast could do would be to take a tape measure to the balance beam before the competition. The truth of the gospel is not a narrow, behavioral sliver you need to anxiously worry about staying on. No, once you're on it, you realize it's both broad and wide and can hold you. So, walk in step with the truth of the gospel, confident the grace of God will keep you.

Conclusion

But what if you fall? What should you do if you lose your balance, step away from the truth of the gospel, and stumble into hypocrisy, like Peter did? What do you do when you realize your conduct isn't in step with the truth of the gospel?

What you do in those moments is you return to the *truth of the gospel*. It is to say with the Apostle Paul, as he said to Peter, "we know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Christ Jesus" (2:15)—full pardon for your sins given to you in Christ and to be received by faith.

Interestingly, Martin Luther actually viewed this passage and the example of Peter as a great comfort to believers. "For it is a great comfort for us to hear that even such great saints sin—a comfort which those who say that saints cannot sin would take away from us."

Samson, David, and many other celebrated men who were full of the Holy Spirit fell into huge sins. Job (3:3ff.) and Jeremiah (20:14) curse the day of their birth; Elijah (1 Kings 19:4) and Jonah (4:8) are tired of life and pray for death. Such errors and sins of the saints are set forth in order that those who are troubled and desperate may find comfort and that those who are proud may be afraid. No man has ever fallen so grievously that he could not have stood up again. On the other hand, no one has such a sure footing that he cannot fall. If Peter fell, I, too, may fall; if he stood up again, so can I.³

You see, then, as well, what this teaches us about true gospel-rooted living. We are feeble and frail, even the best and most godly among us; we are never more than a hair's breath away from hypocrisy ourselves. Who among us is stronger or has greater resolve than the Apostle Peter?

³ Luther, *Galatians 1535*, p. 109.

So, too, we see that our own steadfastness or inherent holiness is never in itself enough. As Luther says, “Our inherent holiness is not enough. Therefore Christ is our entire holiness; where this inherent holiness is not enough, Christ is.”⁴

Amen.

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⁴ Luther, *Galatians 1535*, p. 109.