

**Galatians 2:11-21**  
**(Psalm 49:7-15; Matthew 16:24-26)**  
**“Dying to Live”**

**Introduction**

C.S. Lewis said that he believed in the gospel as he believed in the rising of the sun, not merely because he could see it, but because by it he could see everything else. Apart from the gospel, it is hard to understand how much our sense of right and wrong, of good and evil, of justice and injustice, are shaped by our culture, custom and context, and how much they are based upon trans-cultural truth. Apart from the gospel, it is hard to understand how to apply truth to the daily living of our lives in deciding direction and behavior. Apart from the gospel, it is hard to understand the true nature and purpose of God’s law and of its relationship to various cultural expressions of Christianity. And, finally, apart from the gospel, it is hard to understand the meaning of the cross of Jesus Christ.

In our text, we find the apostle Paul in a mission setting: the first gentile congregation in Antioch of Syria, the congregation that would later send him on his missionary journeys. Paul uses the occasion of his conflict with the apostle Peter – a debate that apparently took place in front of the other disciples in Antioch and must have caused some shock and consternation – in order to shine the light of the gospel on four crucial matters. In his conflict with Peter, Paul charged the great apostle with hypocrisy, not because Paul thought himself a better man than Peter, but because he feared that Peter’s behavior would undercut the gospel that they both held dear, the gospel for which they both lived with courage and passion, and would each eventually die a violent death.

We need to understand that these issues addressed by Paul are still with us, still vexing believers, causing confusion about the very nature of the gospel itself. Until we understand what it means to *be* a disciple, we cannot *make* disciples. Look with me as we shine the light of the gospel on four crucial discipleship issues. The first two concern the behavior of disciples: the difference between holiness and hypocrisy, and the difference between freedom and license; and the second two concern a right understanding of God’s law and of Christ’s cross.

To anticipate where we are going, remember that the heart of the matter is always the matter of the heart. The gospel does not show us how to improve our life. It offers us a radically new life. Paige Benton Brown uses the helpful analogy of a heart transplant. When we receive a new heart, our body tries to reject it, and we must take immunosuppressive drugs in order that our bodies not reject the new heart. Similarly, God gives us the means of grace, not as things we do in order to please him, but as the means through which his new life pours into our new heart and suppresses the world, the flesh and the devil.

## Body

### 1. The gospel transforms our understanding of who we are and of how we are to live (2:11-18).

#### *Conformity to culture gives way to conformity to truth (2:11-14).*

When Simon Peter (*Cephas*) first joined Paul in Antioch, he stepped outside his Jewish culture by eating non-kosher food and enjoying the company of his gentile brothers and sisters in Christ. But when other Jewish friends joined them and were critical of his behavior, Peter stepped away from what he knew to be right – because it was the new way of Jesus – stepping back into a life circumscribed by ceremonial law and breaking fellowship with his new gentile Christian friends.

Peter, of all people, knew better. After all, he was the apostle given the three-fold vision in which non-kosher foods were lowered on a sheet and a voice from heaven told him to eat. When he objected, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean,” the voice spoke again, saying, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 10:13f). God had sent this vision to prepare him to go to the home of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, where Peter would explain to Cornelius and his household the gospel of grace, baptize them and embrace them as family. It was Peter who said on that occasion, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34f).

Yet now, when his old friends who share his Jewish culture show up on the scene and criticize him for not keeping the rules, the “works of the law” (2:16) that marked one as a religious, righteous Jew, Peter turns away from this fundamental truth so crucial to the foundation of the church as a place for those of every people, language and nation, and chooses to identify as a Jew rather than as a member of God’s new community, made one in Jesus Christ. And so, Paul says, “I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned” (2:11). Paul accuses Peter and all the other Jews with him of acting “hypocritically” (2:13), because they knew the truth but chose to follow custom and culture rather than the radical, new, transforming “truth of the gospel” (2:14).

How easily, especially with family and old friends, we can step back into a deeper identification with our family or our culture or our party or our nation, than we do with the Kingdom of God. And when the values and perspectives of our culture are confronted by the truth of the kingdom of God, we lapse back into the comfort and security of espousing views that we know are at odds with the teaching of the gospel, but which nonetheless

seem so right because they do not press us into a choice between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the safe and risky, the known and the unknown. That is why, I think, otherwise gracious Christians sometimes become so mean and shrill in politics or culture wars or times of national crisis, and too easily confuse their group's views with the truth of the gospel. Paul makes clear that, whatever the issue, whatever the cost, we are to be those who stand for the truth of the gospel.

***Works of the law give way to the obedience of faith (2:15-18).***

Flowing directly from this is the way in which our understanding of truth informs and shapes our behavior. The heart of the problem for Peter and his Jewish friends was that they had been raised under what Paul, elsewhere in this letter, describes like this:

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith (3:23f).

In other words, Paul explains the purpose of the rules that marked one out as a faithful Israelite, cultural and religious markers such as dietary restrictions, matters of dress and hygiene, circumcision, etc. These, he said, were like the rules that we make for our children while they are young, rules to keep them safe and to mark them as members of our particular tribe. But once they become adults, they no longer are bound by those rules. We hope that they have now been shaped and molded into morally responsible people who will seek always to be guided by truth.

However, this does not mean that we who are God's children may behave any way we wish. Paul immediately clarifies, "But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor" (2:17f). So then, we are to be guided by truth, expressed by God's moral law – which is simply a picture of what it looks like to love God and love one another – and which is a mark that we actually believe the gospel and are justified through faith.

While we are no longer bound by what Paul calls "works of law," we are always to be recognized by the crucial phrase with which Paul both opens and closes his Roman letter, "the obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5 & 16:26). As the German martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Only those who believe obey, and only those who obey believe."

## **2. The gospel transforms our understanding of God's law and of Christ's cross (2:19-21):**

### ***An instrument of life becomes an instrument of death (2:19).***

This leads, of course, to the question of the purpose of God's law, and of the necessity of Christ's cross. Every mature Christian should know and be able to recite what the reformers called the three uses of the law: the pedagogical (teaching) use, the civil use, and the normative use.

The first, the pedagogical use, holds up to us a picture of the character of God and his righteous requirement for humanity. What it shows us is that we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. It serves, Luther wrote, as a mirror, and what it shows us breaks our pride and shows us our need of grace and mercy.

The second, civil, use of the law shows how we are to live together peaceably in society. No matter how lawless a person may be, he wants his neighbors to keep the Ten Commandments – or at least the parts that relate to one's neighbor. The final, normative use, shows Christians how to live in a way that expresses our love for God and for one another, and that leads in the end to human flourishing.

In our text, Paul appeals to the first use: its pedagogical or teaching role, which shows us our sin and rebellion and makes clear the impossibility of self-salvation. It is a mirror that shows us our souls. Thus, Paul says, "For I through the law died to the law, so that I might live to God" (2:19). God's law is not the problem. We are the problem. Nowhere does Paul make this more eloquently clear than in his Roman letter:

What shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. ... The very commandment that promised life proved to be death for me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure" (Romans 7:7f).

So the problem is not with the law of God. It is "holy and righteous and good" and would be an instrument of life to one without sin, as it was to our Lord Jesus, as he lived in perfect love and kept the law for us. The problem is with us, and for us the instrument of life becomes an instrument of death, as it reveals our desperate plight as rebels against God's mercy and love.

***An instrument of death becomes an instrument of life (2:20-21).***

But, thanks be to God, in his infinite mercy and grace he has made an instrument of death an instrument of life. The cross was, within the Roman world, an instrument of state-sponsored terrorism. Its sole purpose was to terrify Rome's subjects into obedience to Roman law and taxation. Anyone considering sedition must face the possibility of being nailed to a cross, there to die slowly, writhing in anguish. Our word, "excruciating," literally means "from the cross."

In God's majestic mercy, his Son, who alone perfectly kept his law, bore for law-breakers like you and me the most terrifying punishment that the most powerful nation of his day could devise, and in his death conquered our death. At the cross Jesus Christ took all our brokenness and sin – our old life in its entirety – and put it to death in his death, giving us his life in its place, a life perfect, holy and free.

**Conclusion**

Disciples of Jesus Christ, then, are those who are living from a new heart, the very heart of Christ, given us in salvation. With Paul, we can say, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (2:20).

This should change everything: the way we think and act, the way we hope and dream, the way we spend our days and nights, the way we respond to God's love, to temptation and rejection, to pain and disappointment, to success and failure, to victory and defeat. This is the gospel in its life-transforming simplicity and majesty. How will you and I respond today to the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord?

© John M. Wood, all rights reserved