

March 9, 2008

# THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

## *A Cross-Centered Gospel*

**Galatians 2:11 – 21**

Paul's mission and passion was the gospel of Jesus Christ. His whole life was about spreading the fame of Christ's name through the preaching of the Good News. And at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the cross. He said that Christ sent him to *'...preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void (lose its power).* 1 Corinthians 1:17 The message of the gospel is the message of the cross. The center point of the Good News is the cross of Christ. It is not good news if there is no cross. It is so much good advice. And there is a lot of gospel preaching that does not include the cross. You may hear about how your life will improve if you come to Christ – or your health will take a turn for the better – or your finances will be in better shape, but not much about the cross. Who wants to hear about death? Especially this kind of death? You might as well talk about the electric chair. But there is no power in a gospel that excludes the cross of Christ. In the next sentence in chapter one of Corinthians, Paul says, *'For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.'* 1 Corinthians 1:18 ***A cross-centered gospel is crucial because it conveys the power of God to save us.***

And we have seen that Paul is set not only for the spread of the gospel – but the defense of ***the gospel truth that faith in Christ is the only means through which men are made righteous.*** And so he continues in verse 11 contending for that truth: *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.*

I believe Paul tells this little story on Peter for a couple of reasons. The first is to show the Galatians that ***the truth of the gospel is worth contending for*** – even against such icons as the apostle Peter. No doubt Peter was among the most respected of the apostles in the faith and had a stature among the Christians that probably made him a household name in the Christian community. Today it would be something like a Chuck Colson reprimanding Billy Graham for some inconsistency between his message and his lifestyle. After all, who is Chuck Colson – a relative latecomer to the faith and a former convict to boot? And Paul was even worse – he hounded the church to death before he saw the light.

Secondly, he wants them to know that ***the truth of the gospel should not be compromised by the way we live.*** And of all the apostles – Peter should know better than to play the hypocrite. In Acts chapter 10, the revelation came to him that the gospel was not only for the Jews, but also the Gentiles. He was in the city of Joppa one afternoon waiting for lunch and the Scripture records that, *'Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. 10 And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance 11 and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 And there came a voice to him: Rise, Peter; kill and eat. 14 But Peter said, By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. 15 And the voice came to him again a second time, What God has made clean, do not call common. 16 This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.* Acts 10:9b-16

Peter was somewhat perplexed by this – as a good Jew he had conflicting emotions about the vision. On the one hand the Old Testament clearly forbade him to eat certain things that were in the sheet – on the other hand God clearly said, Rise, kill and eat. What's a good Jewish Christian supposed to do? But God brought clarity to Peter when he met Cornelius the centurion and realized that the cross of Christ had bridged the gap between Jew and Greek, the clean and the unclean – and there was no difference between Jews who sinned and Gentiles who sinned – they all met at the foot of the cross. And we know Peter got it because in chapter 11 Peter had to explain himself to the council at Jerusalem because they heard he had eaten with an uncircumcised Gentile. And he concluded this way: *If then God gave the same gift to them [the Gentiles] as he gave to us [the Jews] when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?* Acts 11:17 And yet here in Antioch we find Peter standing squarely in the way.

One implication here also is that if it is possible for tested, tried and faithful men like Peter and Barnabas to go astray from the truth – however temporarily – how much more ought we to be wary of the same thing in our own lives. O, how we all, especially those who preach and teach the word need a Paul in their lives to call us to account and reiterate the truth of the gospel to us and confront us with the truth in those places we have compromised. Because it is not just the truth of the gospel that was at stake with Peter – it was his soul. ***When we let compromise rule in our lives – the gospel gets murky and our lives get complicated – and our faith leaks away.*** Peter was in danger, whether he knew it then or not, of being one of those the writer of Hebrews talks about in chapter 10: *'...but My righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him. 39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.'* Hebrews 10:38-39 ***Do not shrink away from the truth of the gospel.*** Peter was shrinking back – and it took Paul to give him a shove between the shoulder blades and say, 'Quit backsliding and stand up with the truth like a man. Don't let those who are weak in the faith define your gospel.'

One other implication from all this is that ***sin spreads like the plague.*** It is like the Black Death that devastated Europe in the Middle Ages and 1/3 of the population died. That plague was spread by infected fleas who lived on the rats and dogs and cats that overran most cities at that time. They simply hopped from one person to another – infecting them with this horrible disease and depopulating whole cities and districts. Sin is like that – it can spread from one person to another with astonishing speed. When we complain about our circumstances, thereby slandering the goodness of God and calling into question His sovereignty – we tempt those around us to do the same. When we gossip about others and spread stories – we ensnare the ones who listen to us in the same trap. And it spreads – like wildfire.

Many years ago in this church we had an outbreak of the Black Plague and it all started with one person who was upset at the leadership. But like the plague – the fleas of sin hopped from one person to another until the entire body was infected. Some were immune to the disease – others resisted and got help – and those survived. But many succumbed. And I believe that Paul saw the same thing beginning to happen in Antioch with Peter because he describes even Barnabas being carried away by the thing.

*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?"*

When Peter and Barnabas came to Antioch – they had a great time with the Gentiles – in fact Paul describes them as living like a Gentiles themselves. Probably had ham and eggs for the first time. But when those overzealous Jews from Jerusalem came to see what was happening, Peter shrank back and disassociated himself from the Gentiles and in his sin caused Barnabas and the rest of the Jewish Christians in Antioch to sin. And Paul says that is not being straightforward with the gospel. That implies that there is conduct that is out of step with the truth of the gospel. Or to put it another way, ***the gospel of Jesus Christ ought to govern our lives. That is, what we say, what we believe, what we do, must be under the authority of the gospel.*** We cannot say that we believe salvation is by grace through faith alone and live as if it were by works. By our living we must not contradict the truth of the gospel.

To put this in terms we are familiar with: Do we say we walk by faith – and yet our lives reveal that we walk by sight? That is, when trials or temptations assault us – we would rather worry and complain than pray? Do we say that God is our only source in public – but in private believe that God helps those who help themselves? Do we talk about the love of God and the light of heaven at church and yet make our homes a living hell? Do we piously pray for all the poor people in the world and yet when faced with our own poverty whine about it to God? Do we speak critically of others? Do we harbor resentment, become impatient, act selfishly, treasure things more than Christ? Do we say we need a Savior and act as if we don't? You see, we never outgrow the message of the gospel – we are great sinners, but Christ is a great Savior. ***The gospel of Jesus Christ ought to govern our lives.***

*15 "We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles;*

Here Paul is ***not*** saying that Jews are not sinners but Gentiles are – we need to understand that religious Jews considered everyone that did not keep the strict kosher observances of the Jewish religion to be sinners in that regard. He was simply saying that he and Peter were brought up as law-abiding Jews – not law-breaking Gentiles. This is sinner in a limited sense – not an all-encompassing sense as Paul writes in Romans 3:23: *'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.'*

*16 nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.*

The essence of his argument here is that even though Peter and Paul are law-keeping Jews – and they are law-breaking Gentiles – *a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus*. That is no flesh will be counted as righteous by trying to be a law-keeper. **Faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to be saved**. We all must come to faith in Christ – we all must trust in Christ – no one will be able to work their way to heaven. From Adam until the last man on earth – everyone who is saved is saved the same way – by grace through faith in Christ. There is no other way of salvation. *Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness*. Noah, Abraham, Moses and all those saints that lived before Christ all were saved the same way we are saved – by His grace through faith – and that not of our own but of Christ. Of that we will have more to say in chapter 3.

**17 "But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be!"**

Here Paul is summarizing the argument those guys from James were most likely putting forward and it goes something like this: 'Peter, when you live like the Gentiles and encourage them to ignore the dietary and ceremonial laws of the Jews – you make Christ the agent of sin.' Again, we need to understand sin in the limited context we already talked about. Paul means by sin here that when Jews trust Christ for their justification they are free from the ceremonial laws of Judaism and may choose to eat pork or not be circumcised. And according to these Jewish Christians from James, people who live like that are sinners. So Paul says emphatically – 'Christ an agent of sin? Never!' That is not sin – that is freedom in Christ! **Christ died on the cross to destroy all those cultural, racial and ethnic barriers** that kept us apart and hating one another and has made the two one.

After the bloody civil war in our country almost 150 years ago – fought, among other reasons, because of cultural, ethnic and racial issues, Sunday morning service at St. Paul's Methodist Church in Alexandria, Virginia received a momentous jolt. During communion an elderly black man got up first, walked down the aisle all the way from the back to kneel at the altar, and prayed. This had never been done, and everyone, including the minister, had no idea what to do. After a minute of awkward silence and confusion, an older white man with flowing white hair and a white beard got up. He made his way to the altar, knelt right next to the black man, and prayed with him. That man was Robert E. Lee. **Christ died on the cross to destroy all those cultural, racial and ethnic barriers**

Over in Ephesians 2 Paul expressed it this way: **13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.** Ephesians 2:13-16

And then he adds this argument: **18 "For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor.** That is, Paul, in his gospel preaching, has torn down the argument that the law was a means of justification before God – and for him to go back on that by advocating the very thing he had torn down was to make himself a transgressor of the law. The law had never been intended to be used to justify us, but many Jews had understood it that way. The law was given by God to direct Israel's obedience – much like train tracks are laid down to head the train in the right direction. The engine pulling this train is grace – and we are hooked to that engine through faith. Which means that it is not our works that justifies us – but rather the track of obedience on which we are pulled by the engine of grace hooked together with faith.

But it was as if the Jews took the tracks, ties and all, and set them up to heaven as a ladder so they might climb up by their own efforts. This is what drove them – the idea that the law is a long list of steps we need to climb to demonstrate our qualification for heaven. But Paul says that something very different happens under the law: **19 "For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God.**

This is the gospel. Christ was crucified through the Law – that is, under the law of God all men were condemned sinners, ripe for the righteous wrath of God and destined for destruction. But John tells us in his first epistle: *'By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.'* 1 John 4:9-10 **He died for us under the law that we might live to Him under grace.** If God had not sent His Son – we would just be so much fire fuel. In His death on the cross we died – and in His resurrection from the grave we live. And that is the cross-centered gospel.

And this is the result of a cross-centered gospel. **20 "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.** What does that mean – to be crucified with Christ? I think this is important because this is what Christ calls us to in the gospel. It does not mean an actual physical torture of men today – Jesus Christ endured that once for all 2000 years ago. We would never have passed that test – but He did for us. The cross of Christ is an open display of all our that our hellish nature deserved – and when we by faith receive that revelation – understanding that anything we could do to improve our situation is worthless – then we live with the realization that the old hostile-to-God, sold-under-slavery-to-sin me was put to death in the death of Christ.

And so the life I now live – is a life lived by faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ who loved me and gave Himself for me. The reason this is so crucial is that it deals a death-blow to our old, proud self that loves to put the rails up to heaven and try to climb up on our own merits. And Paul says: **21 "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly."** **Climbing the ladder would nullify grace** – grace, which is the power of God – unasked for, unsought, and certainly undeserved – to make us righteous and perfect in the sight of God. **This is what it means to be a Christian – someone whose rebellious heart has been broken – someone whose stiff neck is bowed in humility before God – someone who pride has been dashed against the foundations of grace – someone who can say '...it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me...'**

**This Christian life is a cross-centered life.** We begin new life at the foot of that blood-soaked cross and we never move away. Moving away would nullify the grace of God in our lives because moving away means that we now consider ourselves capable of handling things. Paul wrote to the Corinthians who were struggling mightily with sinful behaviors and sinful thinking, and he said: **'Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures...'** <sup>1</sup> Corinthians 15:1-3 In essence he told them to go back to the cross – that is where the burdens of your sins were rolled away – that is where you need to be living – that is where God is saving you from your pride and anger and impatience and lust and ungodliness and all the other stuff – let your life be a cross-centered life.

*Our Gracious God and eternal Redeemer,*

*Grant that we would know You in the depths of the gospel – in Your sin-killing death and in the power of Your resurrection – that we could say with Paul "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. Let the truth of the gospel penetrate our hearts and permeate our lives. Let our hearts be staggered by the depth of Your love for us and may it fill our souls with tears and joy – tears and repentance for our willful sin and rebellion – and joy and laughter for Your astounding grace to us. May we be the most radical, joy-filled, cross-centered Christians in the world and may we who have been made glad in God live to make others glad in You we pray in the precious name of Jesus, Amen.*

**May the Lord bless you and keep yourselves  
and make His face shine upon you.  
May the Lord be gracious unto You.  
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you  
and give you peace.**