

+ grace. seriously.

The Letter to the Galatians—Fall 2013 Shared Ministry Study
Session 2 (Galatians 2:1-21)—September 17, 2013

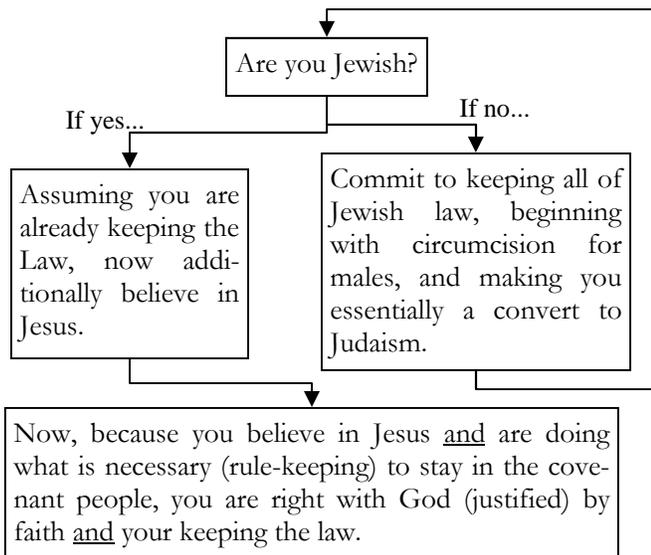
+ The Big Question: How Do We Come Into Right Relationship With God?

In Chapter 1, Paul laid out just what the stakes are in getting the gospel right. Either we have the real thing (what we called the “Jesus + Nothing Else” gospel), or you have a counterfeit, even if the counterfeit *includes* Jesus (what we called the “Jesus + Something” mindset, as in *Jesus-plus-keeping-religious-rules* or *Jesus-plus-being-good* or *Jesus-plus-going-to-church* or *Jesus-plus-my-offering-check*). But Paul wants us to see this is an all-or-nothing proposition: either you have the gospel in all its radical purity (Jesus alone, with no additives or conditions), or you don’t have the gospel at all.

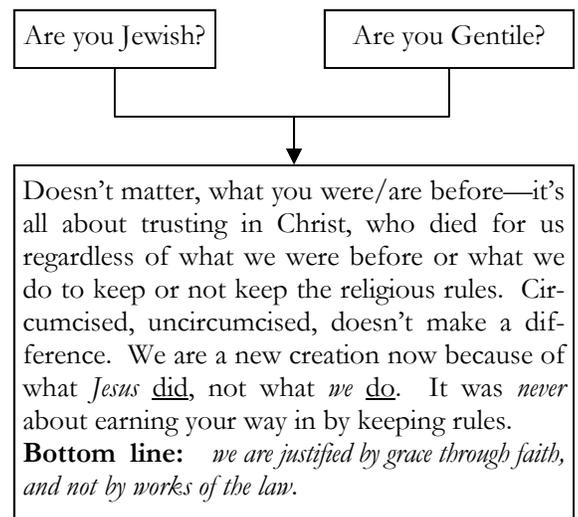
In the 1st century, this was being tested by a debate in the early church over how one came into a right relationship (being “justified”) with God. And since the first generation of Christians all had grown up in Judaism, and Paul was now bringing Gentiles (non-Jews) into the Christian church, there was bound to be conflict about just *who* was “in” and just *how* they “got” there. And this debate came to focus on whether you had to be circumcised (for males) or not, along with keeping the rest of the laws and commandments of the Jewish Law (Torah). Did one, in other words, have to keep the commandments and rules of Judaism *in order* to be a follower of Jesus? Did one have to be *Jewish* (at least by conversion) in order to be *Christian*? And did your status before God depend on your ability to keep those commandments of Judaism—or was it really *Christ alone* who makes the difference between us and God?

The diagrams below summarize the two different answers being debated to those questions, and Paul spends the first two-thirds of Chapter Two giving us the story, from his perspective, of how the early church wrestled with those answers and did its best to live into the answers it was hearing from God.

Judaizers’ “Gospel” (Jesus-Plus)



“Paul’s” Gospel (Jesus-Alone)



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Galatians 2:1-10—The Jerusalem Council

How do followers of Jesus come to conclusions on questions for which we don't have a specific commandment or teaching from Jesus? This is a hard question, because it is scary to go out on a limb and say, "This is what we ought to do," and because we might not all agree at first what the one right answer is. It is sometimes hard to remember that the first Christians wrestled with this kind of situation when they had to answer the question of Gentile converts having to keep the Jewish Law (including circumcision, kosher laws, and other ritual laws). After all, Jesus' first followers were all, *like Jesus himself*, Jewish. And when Jesus gave the Great Commission to "go into all the world and make disciples," his words could have been taken *either* to mean (1) have other people follow the rules of Judaism in order to be my disciples, *or* (2) go tell other non-Jews to become my followers, whether or not they keep the rules of Judaism. At least, for those first Christian leaders, this was an open question. Who was "in"?

This debate came to a head in the early church, and so the Jerusalem apostles gathered along with Paul to make a decision on whether Gentile converts were required to keep the rules of Judaism in order to be Christians. We call this the Jerusalem Council, and its story can be found in Acts 15:1-20. Paul spends his time in Galatians 2:1-10 giving his recollections of that time in Jerusalem, and says that the conclusion was reached that "we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised" (Gal. 2:9).

Paul gives us this story as a way of showing that his Jesus-Only Gospel was really already agreed upon by the Jewish leaders of the Jerusalem church, and that he wasn't inventing some false gospel. On the other hand, Paul makes it clear here that because his commissioning to share the gospel with the Gentiles came from Jesus himself, he is not "under" the Jerusalem church's authority, but rather they are all on the same level of authority. For Paul that is important so it can be clear that Gentile Christians are not second-class members of God's family because they do not keep the Jewish law (which is the driving controversy of this whole book and of the early church).

Questions to Think About

- How do we arrive at conclusions to questions of faith, ethics, action, and truth as Christians? How does Scripture interplay with our experience, or with traditions, or with our reasoning?
- What about situations when we are facing a question or issue that the Bible doesn't *directly* address? How do we arrive at conclusions?
- How do we decide what issues are ones we all have to agree on, and which are ones we can live with diversity of opinion on?

Notes on Galatians 2:1-10

- You can read another account of the "Jerusalem Council" in Acts 15:1-21.
- Paul uses the names "Cephas" and "Peter" interchangeably to refer to the same person, the disciple we know as Simon Peter. ("Peter"/"Petros" would be the Greek nickname that means "rock," and "Cephas" is the Aramaic word that means the same, which Jesus would most likely have actually called him by.)

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Galatians 2:11-14—The Rock with Clay Feet

Sometimes we arrive at truth *messily*. That is, it's not always from the clouds parting and a ray of light from heaven dramatically and clearly getting our attention. There isn't always a sword-in-the-stone to tell you who is chosen to be king, and we don't always instantly make the connections between truth in our *heads* and the implications in our *actions*. So, let's give Simon Peter the benefit of the doubt here. In these verses, we get to see a less-than-ideal side of the "Rock" of the early church, but he wasn't intending to be deceptive or crooked. He acts like a hypocrite, and Paul had to call him on it, but along with the rest of the early church, Peter was still trying to wrestle through the implications of the Gospel for "outsider" Gentile converts to Christianity.

The situation was this: Peter had been sent (by the Holy Spirit, according to Acts 10—so this wasn't just Peter's half-baked plan of his own to increase church membership) to bring the news of Jesus to a Roman centurion named Cornelius, and as a result of that interaction, Cornelius (obviously not Jewish, not to mention *a soldier of the occupying empire!*) came to faith in Christ along with his whole family. That also meant that Peter stayed, ate, and shared fellowship with these new Christians. In his travels, he also came to spend time in the church in Antioch, which had become a sort of home-base for Paul and his Gentile-Christian outreach movement. So when Peter was there, he would eat, stay, and share fellowship with... you guessed it... Gentile Christians who were not keeping kosher or obeying other commandments of the Mosaic law.

This did not sit well with some from the Jerusalem church, who were obviously still thinking that one had to keep all the terms of the Mosaic covenant in order to be a disciple of Jesus. As Acts 11:1-3 tells us, "*Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men at eat with them?'*" So apparently, this made Peter back off from sharing table fellowship with Gentiles and he started to back-pedal on his belief that Gentile Christians were acceptable *as Gentiles*. To Paul, that sounded like hypocrisy.

In Galatians 2:11-14, Paul tells the story from his perspective, saying that he caught Peter in this hypocritical posture of eating with Gentiles (and also therefore not keeping kosher, etc. when he was around them) on the one hand, but then insisting that Gentile converts had to keep the Mosaic law, including food laws and the law of circumcision. To Paul, this was a double standard, as he puts it in Galatians 2:14, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" Underlying all of this, for Paul, is the question we started with tonight: how do we get into a right relationship with God—is it what we *do*, or is it what *Christ has done*?

- Why do you think this issue with Peter and eating with Gentiles was so important to Paul?
- Where are places in your own life where you have struggled, like Peter did, to work out the implications of your faith in real-life situations? What or who helped you to get some clarity?

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Galatians 2:15-21—The Crux of the Matter

In the last section of Chapter 2, Paul moves from the historical episodes he had in Jerusalem and Peter to the big picture theological conclusions he has come to in all of this. And as Paul has been laying the groundwork for already, here he says definitively that the only real Gospel is Jesus-alone.

2:15-16—It Was Never About Rule-Keeping

Paul, we have to remember, writes *as* a Jew, an in fact as someone who had excelled in the Law and had a long list of accomplishments as an expert on the commandments of the Torah. It would have been easier for him, in a sense, to keep at that system where he had a leg up, rather than to be dragged kicking and streaming into the camp of grace. But that’s exactly what happened. Paul says in these verses, “Even though I am Jewish, I have come to recognize that it was never my Jewishness or my keeping of the Laws that made me right with God. It was always faith in God!” This lays the foundation for a move Paul will make later in Galatians, because he seems to beg the question, “Well, aren’t *Jewish* people justified by their keeping of the Law? Are you saying that they were wrong all this time?” Paul’s answer, begun here, is to say that nobody was *ever* saved by their works—it was always trust in God.

- Think about your previous understanding of the Old Testament—what did you learn, and what were you taught about how people in Old Testament times thought they were made right (or “saved”, if you like) with God?
- What does it mean to have “faith” in Jesus? What does it mean to say we are justified “by faith in Christ”? Is Paul saying that we earn God’s love by believing correct facts about Jesus? Is faith something more? Something less? Something just... different than memorizing religious facts?

2:17-21—The Walking Dead

So here’s the conundrum, then. If we are made right with God *as a gift* simply through trusting Christ, and we are still (recovering, perhaps) sinners, does that mean that God has been duped into permitting sin? Is God some co-dependent family member reinforcing bad behaviors by bailing us out while we are mired in self-destructive sin? No, Paul decides (v. 17). But on the other hand, the law could never *make* us good people—it could only show us where we fail. The law insists that sin bears the consequence of death. Paul says, that’s exactly right—God has joined us to Christ, so that our old selves died with him, and his risen life is taking shape *in us*. So, yes, Paul says, the Law still gets its say in there: the Law says that we are sinners, and shows us our need for a savior. And that is precisely what God has given us in Jesus. This is Paul’s solution to the question of, “Why do we have the Law then if we’re not saved by keeping it?” Paul is not saying that Old Testament people *used to* be saved by keeping the Law but now New Testament people are off the hook. He is saying that it was *never* about earning your salvation, and it was *always* about grace. Now that Christ has come we can see that grace in fullness.

- So, what’s Paul’s answer—if we’re saved by grace through faith, do we have a license to do whatever we want? What do you think Paul means when he says it is Christ who lives in him?