

Stand Firm on Justification by Faith Alone!

Galatians 2:11-16

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St. Paul's Lutheran, North Freedom

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

"We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified." (Galatians 2:11-16 NIV)

Dear friends in Christ,

We often prefer to be bystanders on the scene. We don't want to stick our necks out and make waves. But there are times when it's wrong to do nothing. If a little girl goes rushing out into the street, we would rush right out there to save her from oncoming traffic. Her life would depend on it.

Such was the case in today's text. Paul was writing to congregations he had recently established in Galatia, who were very quickly departing from the gospel message of being justified, declared not guilty, by faith in Christ alone. The doctrine of "Justification by Faith Alone," Paul asserted, is a matter of life and death. Our spiritual lives depend on it. Let us learn from Paul's inspired words to **Stand Firm on Justification by Faith Alone!**

Paul related an incident in Antioch, Syria, the headquarters of Paul's mission trips. The congregation in Antioch was the first church where Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) ate together and acted together, contrary to Jewish law that stated Jews were not to associate with Gentiles. For example, Jews ate kosher food, no pork, no shellfish, while Gentiles could eat anything. One day the apostle Peter, a pillar of the church, came to Antioch. Years before, Peter was told by the Lord that it was all right for him, a Jew, to associate and eat with a Gentile centurion named Cornelius. So in Antioch Peter had no problem dining with the Gentiles, eating what they were eating—until a group came from Jerusalem who said to be a real Christian you need Jewish laws, like a male baby must get circumcised. Afraid of them, Peter began drawing back and separating himself from the Gentiles. But Peter's changed behavior had a bad effect. "The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas [a Christian leader] was led astray."

It would have been easy for Paul to stay on the sidelines, to think, "Peter's the leading apostle of the church. I don't have the standing to tell him he's wrong." Or, Paul could have just told Peter, "Maybe staying away from the Gentiles isn't such a good idea," in private to let Peter save face. Instead, Paul spoke to Peter "in front of them all." He rebuked him publicly because Peter had created public offense. As Paul put it, his actions were forcing or compelling "Gentiles to follow Jewish customs." When the Gentiles saw Peter withdraw from them, they began thinking, "If Peter's doing that, maybe we do need to follow Jewish food laws and circumcision and the Jewish Sabbath in order

to be justified, to be righteous by God.” They were falling away from being justified by faith alone—falling away from the truth! Paul had to act and rebuke Peter.

We need to stand firm on this truth by standing against those who undermine the teaching of justification by faith alone. Over a year ago I missed an opportunity to do that. Last year I interviewed an Amish bishop for a paper on the Amish I was doing for a pastors’ conference. I asked the bishop about justification and how they thought they could be saved. He answered, “We’re saved by faith and by works.” Of course that’s a wrong teaching. But instead of correcting him, or showing in the Bible like Galatians 2:16, I simply moved on to the next question. I’ve regretted that ever since. Other Christian churches teach that a person can get to heaven by a mixture of their faith in Christ and their works, the deeds of the law. We can’t give people the impression, “You see it your way, we see it ours,” as though this teaching makes no difference. It does! Life in heaven depends on it!

So let’s stand firm by rebuking those who undermine this truth by their false teaching, who give the impression that you need to earn heaven by your works. And as we do so, let’s learn to stand for a clear proclamation of the truth of being justified by faith alone.

Paul clearly proclaimed this truth to Peter. “Don’t you remember, Peter? You and I are Jews by birth, but Christ has told us that it’s by him alone that we are saved. We know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one [literally, no flesh] will be justified.”

Notice how Paul repeated it, three times, that justification is by faith in Christ, period, and that works of the law have absolutely no part in our being justified, declared righteous, before God. Our Lutheran Church has made clear proclamations of this truth in the Lutheran Confessions found in the Book of Concord. The Augsburg Confession, Article IV, states: “Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ’s sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3 and 4.” The Apology [Defense] of the Augsburg Confession elaborates on this point with 393 paragraphs! And the Smalcald Articles teach the same, stating that “nothing can be conceded” on this teaching.

A clear proclamation of justification by faith alone is found in our synod’s “This We Believe.” “We believe that God has justified all sinners, that is, he has declared them righteous for the sake of Christ. This is the central message of Scripture upon which the very existence of the church depends....We believe that individuals receive this free gift of forgiveness not on the basis of their own works, but only through faith (Ephesians 2:8,9). Justifying faith is trust in Christ and his redemptive work....”

This is what we believe and confess. When we feel guilt over sin—and we all do because we’re all sinners—when we have regrets, don’t turn to the law and wonder, “What must I do to get right with God?” Look to Jesus. Rely on him alone, for it is his work alone that forgives us and gets us eternal life. And that’s all faith is: Trust in Jesus and his work for us. Amen.