

Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

Lesson 3 – United in the Gospel. Good in Theory, But What If I Don't Like Some of These People? (Gal 2:1-10)

While Paul has been busy laying the groundwork for dealing with some specific issues in the churches in Galatia, we have focused our first two weeks reviewing the gospel message and why we should consider it good news. In Lesson 1, we discussed how the gospel calls us to see and relate to God in a way which is often contrary to human nature. We somehow think it is within us to fix things with God, but the gospel tells us it is ultimately God, and only God, who can make things right between us and Him. In Lesson 2, the gospel challenged us to see and relate to those around us differently and to see that the worth of our lives is more than an equation of accomplishments minus failures. **Our lives and the lives of all of those around us take on value and meaning, not because of what we accomplish or fail to accomplish; but because the God of this creation declares that He values each of us.** Paul's life has been transformed by the gospel, and he is baffled why anyone would want to distort or abandon it. That remains to be a very good question.

As Galatians 2 begins, Paul is continuing to give us some background on the early part of his ministry, and he describes a visit he, Barnabas, and Titus had made to Jerusalem. By his description of this visit, we get our first glimpse into the issues now plaguing the Galatians, issues caused by false teachers distorting the gospel (Gal 1:6-9). It is obvious that during this visit, the question of whether Gentile Christians should be required to be circumcised was discussed and probably argued, with "false brethren" saying they must and Paul not yielding for an hour (Gal. 2:5). This was no theoretical argument based on a hypothetical question, because Titus, an uncircumcised Greek convert who was instrumental in Paul's ministry, just happened to be standing right there. The result of the visit was that Titus was not compelled to be circumcised. Paul reports that the church leaders in Jerusalem, including Peter, James, and John, did not insist that Titus be circumcised; and in a show of support for the ministry to the Gentiles, they also offered Paul and Barnabas "the right hand of fellowship"(Gal. 2:9). From Paul's letter to the Galatians, we see that this visit had not put the issue of circumcision "to bed", and false teachers were using this issue and others stemming from the law of Moses to create questions concerning the validity or completeness of the gospel as taught by Paul. As we shall see in the coming weeks, Paul has just begun to defend himself and the gospel, which he received by revelation from Jesus Christ.

Why did Paul make such a big deal about circumcision anyway? What was the harm? Why was Paul so adamant in insisting that Gentile Christians were not required to be circumcised in order to become Christians. From our lesson text, we see at least three reasons.

1. The truth of the gospel (Gal. 2:5). We have already seen in Gal. 1:6-9 that Paul feels strongly about the gospel message. The message had come from God, and man had no right to change, modify, distort, or adulterate it. As we discussed in Lesson 1, to distort the gospel was to abandon the God who had given it.

2. Freedom or liberty within the gospel (Gal. 2:4). In this verse, Paul gives us his first reference to the fact that placing restrictions where the gospel does not, introducing requirements where the gospel does not, or creating rules and regulations where the gospel does not is a threat to the freedom that was intended within the gospel message. In the remainder of his letter to the Galatians, the subject of freedom will be an almost constant theme, and we will discuss it in more depth in future lessons.

3. Unity within the gospel. Circumcision obviously had the potential of dividing **Jews and Gentiles** into different classes within the church, but in the minds of many Jews who were steeped in the law of Moses, circumcision had come to mean more. It, along with many other issues within the Jewish law, had come to represent what divided **clean and unclean** (Acts 10:13-16). Perhaps no one would have literally called one of their Gentile brothers "unclean", but humans often have subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways of showing that certain individuals are less than fully accepted. Finally, circumcision, by its very nature, separated **males and females**. The gospel was in the process of changing how women were viewed in both Jewish and Greek/Roman cultures, and Paul was against anything that suggested that women were valued less in God's eyes than were men.

As a general rule, human beings have made a mess of any and all efforts to have unity with anyone outside of ourselves. For that matter, we often have problems dealing with our own internal conflicts and, in that sense, coming to unity even within ourselves. What does true unity within the gospel look like? How can we enjoy both unity and freedom in the gospel while still maintaining the truth of the gospel? Shouldn't gospel unity be more than mere lip service to the phrase, "the gospel is for all"? Should we be satisfied with merely attaining a meeting of our minds, as difficult as that may be? Or should we and God, as a result of the gospel, want and expect more for ourselves? Isn't it possible that God wants for us not just a meeting of our minds but also a coming together of our whole lives. In other words, God wants us to bring our abilities, joys, burdens, challenges, disappointments, and hopes across whatever divides us and live life together. It's better that way. Human nature makes even superficial, let's-not-but-say-we-did unity difficult at best. To overcome what divides us, we need help, real help, as in the power-of-God help. SPOILER ALERT: In Galatians 5, Paul will tell us about the work of God's Spirit and the importance of love in the lives of Christians. That may have something to do with this subject.

Tom Montgomery

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