

Study: Galatians 2:11-21

Pray for your time together in God's Word!

Opening Question

Ask the Group: When have you experienced conflict with someone over something you felt justified about? How did you respond to it?

or

Ask the Group: Can you think of something that, no matter how hard you try, you still haven't accomplished?

Background Study:

Read to the group: Before we dive into Galatians, we want to look at the context for the events Paul describes in Galatians. **Acts 10** recounts how God used a vision to show Peter that all people are equal to Him and, therefore, all people should have the opportunity to hear the Gospel message, and that he should not think of anyone as unclean or inferior. Peter is then invited into the home of a Roman centurion...

²⁷ While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. ²⁸ He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection."

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³⁴ "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."

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⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles.

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^{Acts 11:18} When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."

Questions for Discussion:

Ask the Group: What was the significance of Peter's revelation?

Possible Answers: Peter was told that the Gospel was available to everyone, not just Jewish people.

Ask the Group: Why would this revelation surprise someone who had been raised under the Jewish law?
Possible Answers: Jewish people had always been taught that in order to be forgiven one had to follow a set of rules. Saying that non-Jews could be Christians meant that the rules they had been taught to follow were not necessary in order to have one's sins forgiven. Not only did it mean that a different people group could become Christians, it also meant that it was not necessary to follow Jewish law before coming to Christ.

Read to the Group: Keeping these events in mind, we are now going to look at a later interaction between Peter and Paul, as recounted in Galatians 2:11-21.

Read: Galatians 2:11-21 (NIV)

***Note:** Peter is called Cephas in this passage. John 1:42 "Jesus looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas' (which translates to Peter)."

¹¹ When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² 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. ¹³ The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. ¹⁴ 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?" ¹⁵ "We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ "But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! ¹⁸ If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker. ¹⁹ "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

Key Terms

Antioch: Located in Syria, nearly 300 miles from Jerusalem and home to several Gentile believers.

Circumcision Group: The Early Christian Council of Jerusalem did not require circumcision of Gentile converts. This became known as the "Apostolic Decree" and is one of the first acts differentiating early Christianity from Judaism. Circumcision was part of God's covenant with Abraham, his descendants, and their slaves and an important sign that the Jews were God's people. The

Circumcision party was a group of people who believed that circumcision should be practiced by all Christians, whether Gentile or Jew.

Questions for Discussion:

Ask the Group: Why do you think Peter pulled back from eating with Gentiles?

Possible Answer: Peter changed his behavior because he was concerned about what the people sent by James, who were Jewish, would think about him associating with Gentiles. Sharing a meal in someone's home indicated close fellowship, but Gentiles didn't observe Jewish food laws, so the groups didn't eat together. A Jew would become unclean just by association.

Ask the Group: How does Peter's spiritual journey in Acts 10 & 11 affect your view of his actions in Galatians 2?

Possible Answer: The problem with Peter's behavior was not just that he was acting differently in front of certain people; his actions also failed to recognize the inclusion of the Gospel and may have misled other believers to think that in order to receive salvation one had to first follow the Jewish laws.

Ask the Group: Based on the language of verse 12, Paul passionately believes that Peter was in the wrong. What were the implications of Peter's actions, and why did Paul confront him directly and even call it hypocrisy?

Possible Answer: God's cleansing mercy makes both Jew and Gentile one people of God. The hypocrisy is particularly striking considering Peter's witness at Cornelius' house in Acts 10: 34-35 & 11:18

Ask the Group: Paul doesn't say that the "men from James" tried to persuade Peter to not eat with Gentiles, only that their presence changed his behavior. Has anyone's presence ever caused your actions to fall out of step with the Gospel?

- How can we live our lives in such a way that doesn't let pressure from others cause us to fall out of step with the Gospel?

Deeper Understanding: Verses 17 and 18

Leaders Note: Have someone read verses 17 & 18 aloud again.

Verses 17 and 18 can be difficult to parse. What exactly is Paul saying? From a Jewish perspective, being without the law (i.e. a Gentile) meant you were a sinner. According to that logic, if Paul teaches that justification in Christ requires that one abandon the law, then he is asking Jews to abandon their justification. From a traditional Jewish perspective, it sounds like Paul is teaching people that they have to become sinners (verse 17) in order to follow Christ (and ultimately be saved). Many non-Christian Jews struggled with this and argued that Christ was "promoting" sin.

Verse 18 is easier to understand when we remember that Paul was once a Pharisee who fanatically enforced the Jewish law. When he became a Christian he realized that the law had been done away with through Christ's death on the cross. If he turned around and started preaching that,

in order to follow Christ, people also had to follow the Jewish law (rebuilt what he destroyed), he would really be a “lawbreaker.” “For if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Verse 21)

Ask the Group: Like the religious Jews of the first century, sometimes we feel like our faith is contingent on our behavior as “good” Christians. What self-imposed rules do you feel like you have to uphold in order to be a “good Christian”?

Possible Answers: We might try to swear less, remain sexually pure, and read our Bible daily, etc. thinking this will make us “better” Christians.

Ask the Group: In verse 20 Paul says he has been “crucified with Christ.” How should our crucifixion with Christ change our attitude toward those rules we try to live by?

Possible Answers: Paul isn’t saying that he physically hung on a cross with Jesus; he’s saying that through trusting in Christ’s redemptive resurrection, he became dead to the Law, insensible to it in the same way that physical death makes a person insensible to all surrounding objects and influences. Paul says that he became dead to the Law as a means of justification. It lost its power over him and ceased to influence him. Paul no longer lives for himself. When we are crucified with Christ we are dying to the authority we give those “rules” in our life.

Ask the Group: Look at verse 21 again. By trying to attain our own righteousness, we act as if Christ died for nothing. How would our lives look differently if we relied on God’s grace instead of trying to attain our own righteousness?

Possible Answers: This answer will likely be different for everyone. We might live more authentically with each other. We would be less inclined to worry about what other people think of us. We would be able to struggle through sin and celebrate blessings in a way that would encourage others to grow and seek Christ as well.

Ask the Group: What is our community application of this passage?

Leaders’ Note: You may choose to create your own application question as a group based on your discussion, or highlight a question from this study.