

Introduction

The recent attacks by Hamas against the nation of Israel are a demonstration of sheer evil of the darkest shades. As long as groups like Hamas exist, danger to Israel and the world will be lurking around every corner. These attacks are a reminder of the deadly and hateful hostility that abides in the being of Satan himself. Hamas opposes with jihad every movement which resists their Islamic ideals. Likewise, Satan opposes God, his people, and his gospel. Sometimes he lobbs rockets of persecution at them, and sometimes he sends infiltrators who come to them with a message that subtly seeks to draw Christ's professed followers away to a substitute gospel. Until Christ returns, the devil will be lurking around every corner and relentless in his attacks. When Paul met with the Ephesian elders for the last time, he warned them to be on the alert because savage wolves would come in among the flock speaking twisted things. It is imperative that we be crystal clear about the essence of the gospel and that we be ready to defend it, even when the threat is indirect, when it comes from behavior that is out of step with the principles it embodies. As we come to Galatians 2:11 this morning, we find that Paul is having to defend the gospel even against the hypocritical conduct of Peter himself.

[Read text and Pray]

Remember the context. In the initial section of this letter to the Galatians, Paul is setting forth the case that the Galatians should reject the distorted version of the gospel that certain teachers were preaching to them. They were claiming that in addition to faith in Christ, Gentile believers must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to actually be saved. Paul asserted bluntly that such a claim actually results in no gospel at all.

Thus far we have observed five planks of evidence in his case. 1. Paul's apostolic authority is from God. 2. Paul's determination is to please God, not man. 3. Paul's conversion substantiates that his gospel came from God. 4. The transformation of Paul's life demonstrates power that could only come from the true gospel. And 5. Paul received affirmation from the apostles in Jerusalem.

This morning we come to the sixth plank in Paul case. He decisively contended in opposition to Peter when Peter's conduct was out of step with the truth of the gospel. It happened when Peter made a visit to Antioch.

Antioch was a vibrant city in those days. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire with a population of more than 500,000. Among those citizens lived a sizable number of Jews totaling around 65,000. It makes complete sense that Antioch became the hub of early Christian expansion beyond Judea and Samaria. It was at Antioch that Jesus' disciples had first come to be called Christians. Barnabas and Paul were involved in the leadership of the Antioch church. And it was from here that Paul and Barnabas were sent out on their first missions and church-planting endeavor. Upon their return, the two remained in Antioch for an extended period. It was during this time that Peter came up from Jerusalem to visit and fellowship with the Christians there. It was then that the event described in our text this morning took place.

Paul brings this event to the attention of the Galatians in order to further establish the essential and distinctive character of the true gospel and that it is worth an unwavering defense. Paul had to

stand completely alone to contend for it, but contend he did even to bring correction to such an important man as Peter himself.

We will look at the text under two headings. First, I want you to see ...

I. Face-to-Face Opposition. (11-14)

We saw previously that when Paul went to Jerusalem to confer with the apostles concerning the gospel, the only controversy that arose was precipitated by false brothers who weaseled their way in. The apostles fully recognized Paul's call and Paul's gospel. They gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and to Paul. It is a stark contrast to move ahead to when Peter came to visit the church in Antioch.

At first everything was well. The fact that the church consisted of a mix of Jews and Gentiles was not an issue of division. And Peter jumped right in. He shared fellowship meals with Gentiles without any qualms. Think about it. Peter had been the tip of the spear when Gentiles first believed. He received a vision from the Lord that there was no more distinction between clean and unclean foods. At the direction of the Spirit of God, he went to the home of a Gentile named Cornelius and preached the gospel. A large group of Gentiles believed and the Holy Spirit came on them and Peter directed them to be baptized. When he reported to the church in Jerusalem what had happened, he was criticized for going to the Gentiles and eating with them. Peter defended what he had done, however. He testified that this was God's work and he could not stand in his way. And so when Peter arrived in Antioch he ate freely with the Gentiles there.

After some time certain men arrived from Jerusalem. Then, out of the fear of being criticized, Peter withdrew from eating with the Gentile believers. Peter did not have a doctrinal change of mind. He acted for the sake of his own interest. He did not want to be troubled by the Jewish legalists. So he withdrew from eating with the Gentiles. Much was at stake here so Paul publicly confronted Peter. Important issues in Peter emerge in his withdrawal.

First, Peter was in the wrong and he knew it. In verse 11, we find the statement that Peter "stood condemned." This does not mean he lost his salvation. It is Paul's way of saying that what Peter had done was clearly wrong before the Lord and he knew it. He had not rejected the truth but he had acted in a way that opposed it. It was blatant hypocrisy. However, the suggestion seems to be present that Peter came to acknowledge his wrong and repent of it.

None of us ever reach a point at which we are beyond sinning even in egregious ways. Let Peter's example be a warning to us all. Let us all take heed lest we fall.

Second, Peter's committed this wrong because of fear. In verse 12, we read that he "separated himself, fearing the circumcision party." He wasn't influenced by truth but self-preservation. We well remember the time Peter denied that he was a follower of Jesus or even knew him. It was due to the fear of man that Peter swore to a mere servant girl that he did not know Jesus.

The fear of man is a powerful force that will lead even strong believers at time to compromise what we know and to do things we know we should not. We need to remember that any threat from humanity is temporal at best and that the greatest fear we should have is the fear of failing the Lord.

Third, Peter's influence was powerful. Verse 13 says that "the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray." It was like a trail of dominoes. When the first one fell, all the others in line came down in succession. The fall of one led to the fall of the

others. Even Barnabas succumbed to the pressure. See what a powerful effect is had by the example of one? Every one of us is a leader in this respect. The actions we take will have an impact on others. It is just another reason to exercise care in life. Someone's eyes are on you and on me. Our influence carries weight. It is imperative that we exercise great care in our actions because we could be the influence that leads someone astray. At the same time we should beware of thinking we are right just because we are influential. Every Jew but Paul followed Peter because he was influential. However, being influential did not make him right.

Somebody has to stand up when everybody else is falling, and that is what Paul did. He opposed Peter publicly. This was not a personal attack based upon any vengeful motive in Paul. He was concerned for the integrity of the gospel. It was when he recognized that the conduct of the Jewish Christians was not in step with the truth of the gospel that he spoke up. It was essential that everyone hear what he was saying.

Paul first asked Peter a question that revealed the hypocrisy in which these Jewish Christians were engaged: (verse 14) "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" In other words, how can you expect Gentiles to live like Jews when we Jews don't live like Jews? What you are doing is hypocrisy! And it is not in step with the truth of the gospel. So Paul opposed Peter face-to-face.

In the next major section, I want you to see ...

II. A Compelling Explanation. (15-21)

Here is why it is ridiculous to enforce the Jewish law on believing Gentiles. Paul's explanation here may seem esoteric. But trust me it is essential for every one of us to understand the fundamental argument he is making. It is an argument which points out the difference between religion that damns people to hell, and the way that God saves souls for heaven.

Ever since the fall, people have been making their own religions and forming their own ideas about how to be right with God or whatever god or gods they worship. We see as early as Cain an approach to God which is founded on one's own ideas about what will find acceptance with God. People in general believe, like Cain, that doing our best and trying our hardest will satisfy God. That is what we need. Years ago, as a 14-year-old I was doing yard work with a neighbor lady and trying to witness to her. She told me she thought she was right with God because she tried to keep the Ten Commandments. I have heard innumerable people make the same claim down through the years. Most of the world shares the presumption that trying to keep the commandments is what counts. The so-called party of the circumcision did too.

The way of salvation has always and only been by grace through faith, expressed in trusting obedience to God. The saints of old always and only gained approval through faith. The false teachers said, "No; faith in Jesus is good, but it is not enough." Law-keeping was also necessary to be right with God. It was the law and their attempts at keeping it that made them right with God. This is why they insisted that Jews withdraw from unclean Gentiles and refuse to eat their unclean food. This is why they insisted that Gentiles should be circumcised and observe the Jewish law. They could not be complete apart from their own efforts at keeping the law.

Paul's words to Peter and all those around exposed the fallacy of such thinking. Let me paraphrase what he was saying. Possessing the law distinguishes Jews from Gentiles, who indeed are sinners. Jews hail from God's covenant people with all sorts of advantages. However, whatever difference of advantage they may have had, it does not change the fact that no one—neither Jew nor Gentile—is

justified by law-keeping. Justification before God comes only through faith in Jesus Christ. That's why Paul and Peter themselves had believed in Jesus. They knew that no one will be justified by works of the law. And coming to that conclusion involved their recognition that they themselves, though Jews, were sinners too. And the law could not help them be restored to a right standing before God. Only Jesus could do that. So they forsook trusting in the law.

This is the only thing the Judaizers could see as sin. They would therefore reason that if you forsake the law to only trust in Jesus, then under that viewpoint Jesus is a servant of sin. Therefore, Paul entertained that charge. "If in trusting Christ we acknowledge ourselves to be sinners, is Christ the servant of sin?" he asks. "No," he says, "certainly not." My admission that though I have the law yet am a sinner and seek to be justified in Christ does not make Christ a servant of sin. Christ is not feeding the cause of sin. My release from the law is not sin. Rather my building back a foundation of law-keeping after having trusted in Christ is what is sin. I would be a transgressor if I went back to trusting in the law. If I built back what I tore down to believe in Christ—THAT would actually be the transgression. The law, by revealing my sin, killed me. I died to the law through the law. And I died to the law not to live for the sake of the law but to live unto God himself. That sums up Paul's argument. And nestled within it are several crucial truths which I now want to point out one-by-one.

A. First, let's talk about this word, justification. We see it twice in these verses, but justification is at the heart of the truth of the gospel. The problem with the false teachers has to do with their wrong ideas about justification. They think themselves justified by having and trying to keep the law. Paul contends that no one can be justified by works of the law. So what does it mean for a person to be justified?

To be justified before God means to be counted righteous. In Romans 4 Paul says of Abraham that he was justified. He believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. To be justified is the opposite of being condemned. To the justified, Paul says in Romans 8, there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. In other words, if God justifies us, no one can bring any charge against us. There is no one to condemn. To condemn is to declare guilty. Justification in direct contrast is to declare righteous.

To be declared righteous is better by far than merely being seen as if I had never sinned. When a person is justified, God does not merely see them as not being a sinner but actually sees them as fulfilling all righteousness. See what happens in the great exchange Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians 5:21. There the scripture says, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Not only do the justified have their sins removed and placed on Christ; they also have Christ's righteousness credited to them!

This work of justification is at the heart of the gospel. So justification is the removal of the guilt of sin and the granting of being counted righteous. This is what is essential to be right with God. Justification is what is indispensable for a person to be admitted to heaven. This is why Christ died and was raised. Now with an accurate understanding of the concept of justification, let's turn to how it is that a person may become justified. Paul addresses the Jews' impossible idea and then holds forth God's exclusive provision.

B. The Jews' impossible idea is that people are justified before God by works of the law. This idea depends on one's own attempts and one's own righteousness. I mentioned my neighbor earlier and there are so many people who, like her, think of themselves as good persons who just need to try. They fail to see that a law-breaker is a law-breaker, that no matter how many laws you think you

keep, if you've broken even one, you are guilty. James 2:10 says, "for whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it." Then he says in verse 11, "if you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law."

You and I are law-breakers. And as such we stand condemned if we stand on our own. And the divine sentence for sin is eternal condemnation which calls for eternal punishment. You may think you are a good person, but just go through God's moral law one command at a time. It doesn't take long before you have to conclude that we are all lying, murdering, blaspheming, adulterers at heart. To rest our hopes for right standing before God on works of the law is a hopeless proposition.

Do you know what a high striker is? It is that strength-testing carnival game. The contestant takes a giant long-handled mallet in hand and proceeds to swing the hammer down hard onto a pad. As the pad goes down on the front end, it propels a puck upward on the back end towards a bell at the top of the tower. If the contestant is strong enough and causes the bell to ring, he wins a prize. It is very rare I think for anyone to ring the bell. Men and women proceed to the high striker and swing with all their might without sending the puck even half-way up the tower. They do their best and yet never hear the bell ring. It's nearly impossible. Well, friends, it is even far less possible for your best efforts and your greatest attempts to please God with works of the law. It is completely impossible for a law-breaker to reach the mark of divine holiness and perfect righteousness in order to stand justified before God.

C. And that's the bad news. But the good news is that God has made a way FOR us where there was no way THROUGH us. God's exclusive provision for justification is his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus did what none of us could do. He lived perfectly and righteously. He died savingly. And he rose victoriously.

And so Paul says we know that a person is NOT justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus is to depend upon Christ and the fact that he perfectly and completely fulfilled God's law and suffered the penalty of our law-breaking in our stead. Peter and Paul themselves had believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith. And the scripture declares that there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. In him God has done what the law could not do. So if you are in Christ through faith, you are truly justified before God. And you are on your way to heaven and the eternal joy of knowing, loving, and worshiping the eternal and one true God.

C. Now what happens if we try to mix these two divergent paths? What happens if we start with Jesus and then add law-keeping in order to stay justified with the Lord? Well, what happens is a disaster. Paul likens it to rebuilding what you tore down. If you rebuild the law after tearing it down to believe in Jesus, then you prove yourself to be a transgressor. To add works of the law back in to the equation is transgression itself, and if in any way I am depending on my keeping of the law, I will be condemned and not righteous but a transgressor before God.

If you jump down in your Bible to verse 21, you see Paul saying that if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. That is, if my standing with God in ANY WAY depends on my law-keeping to any degree, then what Christ has done is of no use. If it were 99% Christ's work and 1% my law-keeping then Christ's death is for nothing because if it only is 1% dependent on me, that 1% is a guaranteed loss, and if I am not 100% reconciled to God, I remain unreconciled and Christ died for nothing. So don't you see? Justification is all of Christ and none of me. All I can do is receive a gift through trusting and believing God.

So you see, here is Paul's compelling argument that no doubt left Peter and the Jewish Christians in Antioch speechless and ashamed, but at the same time, I think it left them resolved to live in the fullness of the freedom Christ gained for them through the cross.

You may be here this morning in a state of spiritual weariness because you have tried your best; you have been working hard to obtain the favor of God. But down within you know that your best is not enough. You wonder is there some hope for a sinner like you to be right with God, to have hope of his love and acceptance, to be confident that when your physical eyes close in death and your eternal eyes open beyond that you will be looking unto God in peace. Is there a way for you to escape the condemnation you deserve? Absolutely there is! You must abandon all hope in anything and everything you have done. You must acknowledge you are a sinner helpless to save yourself and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ who died in the place of sinners and rose again for their justification. The promise for those who desire to escape the righteous wrath of God is "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved."

You may be weary this morning because you have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, but you have been living before God as though your favor from God depends upon you. Listen, it always depends on what Jesus has done from first to last. Should you obey the Lord? Absolutely! But don't obey because it keeps you saved. Obey because you have received from the Lord his marvelous gift of justification. He has made you to be someone you never would have been on your own. Live by faith out of who he has made you to be.

You may be filled with joy today as you have heard these words and your soul reckons with them they are true and they have been your hope and delight before God. Well, join me in glad songs of praise to the glorious God of grace who has saved us. And let us resolve to stand with Paul in the defense of the truth of the gospel and live in step with it. The days will come when Satan will tempt you to despair. He will urge you to start trying really hard to be what you can only be through grace. Look upward steadfastly to the sinless Savior who died in your stead. Rest in him. Love Him. And proclaim him to everyone you can.

Conclusion

If Peter and Barnabas could be led astray, you and I could be as well. The fear of man is a powerful thing. We are weak and vulnerable. We need not be arrogant, but we must be convinced of the truth of the gospel and we must be unwavering in the defense of it.