

Act in Line with Justification by Faith

Galatians 2:11-16 (NIV)

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."

What does a church do? God told us one of our responsibilities in our first Bible reading today saying, "When I [the Lord] say to the wicked, 'You wicked person, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood." (Ezekiel 33:8) We, as members of God's Church, are called to correct our brothers and sisters in Christ when they're sinning. God has made us our brother's keepers.

Of course, confronting sin, this is not really a desirable responsibility. Who wants to tell someone else that they're wrong? Who wants to suffer the repercussions of doing so? Who wants to bring confrontation? Besides, doesn't God tell me not to judge? Who am I to point out sin? I'm a sinner too! Yet, God's Word is clear: "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over." (Matthew 18:15)

If it makes us feel uncomfortable, this responsibility to call one another's sin out and correct it, imagine how Paul must have felt calling out Peter in Antioch. I mean, Peter is one of the Twelve, one who walked and talked with Jesus, a pillar of the Church. Paul, he's just a convert. And yet Paul is so bold to call Peter out in front of the other Christians in Antioch saying, "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." (verses 14b-16)

Imagine what might have run through Peter's mind. "Who do you think you are, Paul? I spearheaded the Gospel outreach to the Gentiles. I received the vision that God loves the Gentile just as much as he loves the Jew, that he lived a perfect life for them just as much as he did for us, that he shed the same blood for them that he did for us. I showed people that we all have equality before God - equally perfected and saved through faith in Jesus Christ, regardless of skin color, background, or ethnicity. And you lecture me in front of all our brothers and sisters in Christ? How many Christians are not here today because you arrested them, Paul? How many did you persecute until they renounced their faith in Christ? Remember Stephen, how you approved of his murder? Who are you to lecture me about eating or not eating with Gentiles?"

For many of us, our first reaction to confrontation of sin is to get defensive, angry even. "How dare this person accuse me of such things?!" Because of our sinful nature, we tend to be quick to anger, quick to speak in our own defense and attack the other person, and slow to actually listen to the correction.

Yet, the confrontation needs to happen. Paul saw the effects of what Peter was doing. Peter had been eating with the Gentiles, a display that they were unified in faith, of equal status before God. But then other Jews came and Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles. The message was being sent that unless you lived like a Jew, unless you followed the Old Testament laws like circumcision and eating a kosher diet, you were not on equal footing before God. The Jewish way of life was more God-pleasing and acceptable.

And it wasn't just Peter living contrary to the teachings of God by making divisions between Jews and Gentiles in the church at Antioch. Paul noticed "the other Jews joined [Peter] in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray." (verse 13) The Christian Church was being led into sin and away from Christ. By Peter's actions, people began believing that they had to follow certain rules and do certain things in order to be loved by God, forgiven by him. By their actions, Peter and these other Jews were turning from faith in Christ to faith in their works by the law to make themselves right and acceptable to God.

Faith in Jesus Christ is more than believing that Jesus existed, that he was a good man, that he did amazing things. If we look at Jesus primarily as an example, as just a great guy, then Jesus is nothing more to us than a how-to-please-God-do-it-yourself manual. It

means that Jesus didn't actually save us from anything but instead gave us more things to do in order to get to a happily ever after heaven sort of thing. When we view Jesus this way, this faith in Jesus is no different than any other faith that says that by the work we do we earn something good for ourselves – whether it is here and now or something better after this life.

However, this is not the Christian faith. This is not Paul's faith, nor is it Peter's. They both knew that the only way that they are justified before God, declared "not guilty" of their sins in God's sight, is through faith in Jesus Christ, in his life, in his works. Jesus, being God, came down from heaven, took on our human flesh, specifically so that he could live for us in our place, perfectly keeping all of God's commands because we could never do that. And then he sacrificed himself once for all people, paying for all sins, all wrongs, all injustices, all mistakes of all time because he is both God and Man. My and your standing with God, all rest entirely on what Christ has done and not on what we do. This is what it means when we say that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ and not by works of the law. Nothing we do, including confronting the sins of our brothers and sisters in Christ makes us right before God.

This is why it was so bad that Peter, by eating exclusively with the Jews, gave the impression that people are justified, declared not guilty before God, by what they do – eating a kosher diet and being circumcised. He was not acting in line with what he believed because he knew as did Paul, "by the works of the law no one will be justified." (verse 16)

If Peter needed to be confronted because he wasn't acting in line with the truth of the gospel, where do we need to be confronted? Do I give the impression that unless you do certain things, that if you don't come to church and Bible study every single week, that if you do not give a full 10% or more of your income, that if you don't sign up for every volunteer request, that if you don't come to every activity outside of worship and Bible study, well, then you are a second tier Christian, a B-teamer, not as valuable or as loved by God as the A-teams, those who go above and beyond in their Christian faith? Does my correction need to come in a different way, that I give people impression that if you just truly lived your faith in Christ you would stop having troubles, or that because I am a Christian, my life is always peachy-keen? By putting on a face that my life is always good and that I never struggle, am I leading other Christians to pretend that their lives should be that way too? Is the confrontation that I need the fact that I avoid calling people out on their sins because I'm just not good at confrontations or because I think I'm doing God's work by keeping the peace in the church? Is my confidence in my Christian living in me or is it in Christ who justifies? Do I turn a blind eye to Christian elitism or to the hypocrisy that a Christian because they are a Christian never have any problems and never wrestle with their faith?

When confronting our sin, our hypocrisy, we start with the person in the mirror. Am I acting in line with the gospel, that Christ has taken away all my sins and made me perfect before God? If I am, then I will confront sins knowing that I do so in order to turn people back entirely to Christ to take away all our sins. Confronting sin among our fellow Christians is acting in line with our justification by faith in Christ. We confront sin because we know it is paid for totally and completely by Christ.

So, when I am confronted with sin, I listen and I examine. I bite my tongue that so quickly wants to dismiss and instead defend myself. I repent, if indeed I am not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, just like Peter did. I go forward, knowing that Christ has already paid for my sin and declared me "not guilty" by what he has done for me. I strive to change my ways. If I ignore people sinning and avoid the confrontation, I ask God to give me strength to say what needs to be said, that he would use me to guide people back to him, back to acting in line with the truth that we are all equally justified by faith in Christ. If I am giving the impression that there are more elite Christians, then maybe I need to break out of my comfort zone and get to know the people that don't come every single week, who aren't always in Bible class, who aren't always volunteering. Get to know them to see how the Lord loves them just as much as he loves you and how God is using them in different ways than he is using you. If I am giving a hypocritical portrayal that I as a Christian don't struggle, then maybe I need to express my struggles, ask for help, ask people to bear up my burdens with me as brothers and sisters in Christ do.

Jew, Gentile, Lutheran, whoever, we are all justified in the same way that Peter and Paul were. "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." (verse 16) We are right with God, declared not guilty of our sins, regardless of who we are because Jesus lived perfectly for us and gave up his perfect life into death on a cross to pay for all our sins past, present, and future. This truth is for everyone. We act in line with the truth of the gospel and confront and correct sins so that people stay connected to Christ and his full and free forgiveness and his perfection that clothes us. Amen.