

TRUE GRACE

Galatians 2:11-21

People may truly believe in any number of absolute truths and yet fail in the performance or outworking of those truths in their lives simply because they have been conditioned to do certain things or respond in certain ways by “experience, environment, or the latest popular belief system.” A term that describes this phenomenon that has emerged over the past couple of decades is “political correctness.” What other names might be used to describe this practice? Some descriptors that come to mind are “compromise” and “hypocrisy.”

It is generally true that we will behave in a manner that agrees with what we believe. Another way to state this idea is that one will not consistently act in a manner that is not in harmony with what he believes. Let’s look at the example of telling a “white lie” in order to avoid hurting someone’s feelings. Supposedly, we would be attempting to “balance” two beliefs we might have: The first is that we should always tell the truth. The second is that we should always be kind to people.

If we are confronted with a choice of being absolutely truthful versus being unkind, then a “white lie” becomes a position of compromise that a person might choose because the consequences of being “unkind” are more immediate and the person who will “enjoy” the “kindness shown” is thought to be less forgiving than God Whom we ultimately offend with the lie.

Now we have complicated this idea about what we “truly believe” and what we DO with conflicts that may exist among the “many things, ideas, and principles” that make up our belief system. There are other complicating factors for us as Christian because we learned a lot of the ideas and principles prior to our salvation. This is why we are admonished by Paul in Romans 12 to be transformed by renewing our minds, etc. This is also why Paul had to admonish the Christians in various churches to walk according to what they had been taught and why he thought it necessary to point out to the church at Philippi that they had not learned Christ in a certain way.

We process the various inputs and beliefs we have about what is right and what is allowable and then our actions are influenced by some sort of “weighted average” of the conflicting beliefs and try to come up with a balance of all the alternatives. Sometimes we may see a problem in that the “weight” we apply to each belief that forms the “conflict set” is dependent on the circumstances in which we find ourselves. This is simply “situation ethics” at work in our lives.

In an effort to establish the validity of his argument regarding which “good news” to believe, Paul told the Galatian Christians his conversion experience and the disciplining he received for three years following his conversion. He also told them about how easy it is to slip into our old ways of thinking about our relationship to God. He told about a time when even Simon Peter the leader of the early church had been influenced by Jewish tradition.

Confronted by Truth – 2:11-14

¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. ¹³ The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, “If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? Galatians 2:11–14 (NASB95)

It is somewhat difficult for us to imagine the biases based on religious background that existed in the early church. Peter had been the first to share the Gospel with the Gentiles and God had shown him that the Gentiles were acceptable to Him just as the Jews were. In spite of all his boldness, Peter tended to be cautious regarding offending his countrymen. An example of this caution was that he did not go to the home of Cornelius without taking some witnesses along.

This caution or concern about offending what might have been thought of then as orthodox Jews was again seen in the incident Paul related. Peter was visiting in Antioch and “fellowshipped” freely with all the Christians regardless of their Gentile or Jewish background. However, when a delegation of Jewish Christian from Jerusalem came to Antioch, Peter behaved differently. He no longer ate with the Gentile Christians, for example. This behavior influenced the other Jews who were part of the church at Antioch to do the same thing.

How often do we think about the impact our actions may have on others who see us and think that we are a good example to follow?

This action was so obviously wrong that Paul challenged him regarding such behavior. Paul’s argument to Peter and the other Jews was that they had found freedom in Christ and did not see the need to be bound by the rituals that pointed to Christ but were fulfilled in Him. It is somewhat obvious that Peter and Barnabas and several other Christians with Jewish heritage were behaving hypocritically when the representatives from James came from Jerusalem.

What Paul wrote was that Peter and the others (by their hypocrisy) were compelling or putting pressure on the Gentile Christian at Antioch to follow Jewish traditions and practices. How did Peter’s action suggest that the Gentiles could not be fully received as part of God’s people? Would they interpret what was done as an attempt to force them to adopt Jewish practices?

Is it possible to pressure people to change their behavior by such actions as withdrawing from them, not sitting at the same table with them for a meal, and/or treating them as if they were not as important as someone who “did it the right way” or kept all the customs? What are some things that we may do in the church today that would be influential or put pressure on others in our church to change the way they worship and serve the Lord?

It is most likely that the behavior of Peter and Barnabas was not intended to make the Gentile Christians change their behavior. They were simply trying to avoid criticism from the new visitors from Jerusalem. The others who followed Peter’s example were just “following the leader” and, apparently, did not consider the impact that their actions might have on the Gentile converts in the church (their brothers and sisters in Christ).

Do we really believe that the way a person is saved and becomes a part of the Body of Christ (the church) that there is no difference in slave or free, Jew or Gentile, male or female, rich or poor? The good news that was revealed in Christ was simply that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by God’s grace through faith in the completed work of Christ.

Justified by Grace – 2:15-18

¹⁵ “We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; ¹⁶ nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified. ¹⁷ “But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! ¹⁸ “For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. Galatians 2:15–18 (NASB95)

To put these verses in context we need to note that they immediately follow the account of Paul's confrontation of Peter for behaving differently when some Jews came to Antioch. Paul's argument was that they (being of Jewish background and having been raised under the requirements and emphasis of observing the law), had discovered that righteousness before God did not happen because a person observed the law. If this did not work for those who were Jews by birth, then why would the Judaizer or the Galatians think it would work for anyone?

Right standing before God comes about by faith in God's revelation of Himself to us. When God revealed Himself to Abraham, Abraham believed God and that belief was accounted to him as righteousness. The full revelation of God to mankind came to us in Jesus and when we believe God as revealed in Jesus, then we are justified by that faith. Having discovered this revealed truth, we acted on it by believing and received the grace of God *apart* from the observance of the law.

There is a definite conflict that is found in this situation. First of all, if justification by grace through faith is what we believe, then all who trust in God's provision are viewed by God to be in a right relationship to Him and there are no other requirements such as race or gender or national origin. On the other hand, a Jewish person who believes that eating a meal with a non-Jew is defiling and causes him to sin because he violated the ceremonial food law would not be able to observe both beliefs. He could make the argument that believing and acting in accordance with being justified in Christ causes him to sin based on breaking the "food law." This results in a foolish argument that "following the precepts of the teaching of Christ results in sinful behavior as defined under the requirements of the old system of rules, regulations, and rituals." This situation is essentially what the age-old argument is about when some say that "justification by faith" simply means that a person can "sin all he wants to" or is a license to sin. The counter argument is that "if we are truly saved, then we sin more than we want to."

Verse eighteen describes something that really is sinful and that would be "trying to reinstitute practices that had been deemed unnecessary and of no value for salvation by Christ Himself by His fulfilling all the requirements of the Law by His death on the Cross." When He established the New Covenant, then the Old Covenant was canceled and of no power and to attempt to reinstate those practices as necessary for salvation would be a serious sin (against the law of God) since that would be stating that what God did for the human race (Jews and Gentiles) by sending His only begotten Son was of no purpose or value.

Crucified with Christ – 2:19-21

¹⁹ "For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God. ²⁰ "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. ²¹ "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly." Galatians 2:19–21 (NASB95)

The Law tells us "the wages of sin is death." In effect, the Law prescribes the penalty for not keeping the Law. This penalty for failure in the sight of the Law is also the gateway to being set free from the Law itself.

Paul's argument is that in Christ we are freed from the law because we have been crucified with Christ as we identify with His death on the cross. If I am dead to the law, then the law has no more authority or influence over me.

Another way to look at this is to consider the following: Does "being justified by faith and being declared righteous before God" mean that there is not ever any sin in our lives? No, it doesn't mean that. Well, if we are found to have sinned (we are sinners), then does that mean that God approves of sin when He declared us to be righteous? No, it doesn't mean that either.

Before our being in Christ we were sinners *by nature*, but now our nature has changed and we no longer have that old nature (“the old has passed away, behold all things have become new,” 2 Cor 5:17). Now we are sinners because of our actions and not our nature. The laws and regulations were put in place to deal with the old nature, but in Christ we no longer need these.

Since we are dead to the law because our old nature has passed away, we should not try to bring the new nature under the dominance of the law which was there only for the purpose of restraining and controlling the old nature. Since we have died to the old way (if we have been crucified with Christ) and have been raised to new life in Christ, then the (new) life we have has its source in God. It is supernatural and it is spiritual. The old life has passed away, and the new life is really the life of Jesus Christ. “Jesus in me” (the new life) does not need the restraints of the law that was designed for the old sin nature. In Christ I have been delivered from such bondage.

In the New Bible Commentary, the writer observed: “Paul is beginning to group a variety of terms that constitute two distinct, and even contradictory, systems. To the one belongs works of the law, flesh, slavery, sin, death; to the other, faith, Spirit, inheritance and promise, freedom and sonship, righteousness and life. The first group characterizes the present evil world; the second reflects the coming of the new age, Jerusalem above.”

Lessons Learned

We are saved apart from the law in the same way that Abraham was saved – by simply trusting God. We have a better understanding of all that God has done for us in Christ and as we exercise that trust, He transforms us by His Spirit working in us to produce the behaviors that are like the works Jesus did while He was on earth. Following the leading of the Holy Spirit produces a consistency in our walk and we find that we are really blessed as we grow to be more and more like Christ.