

## **Making it Personal**

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

Nov. 11, 2018 – AM Sermon

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Galatians 2:11-21

So let me tell you about the time I confronted Pastor Peter Jonker in front of the entire Council. I didn't want to do it but it was too important to hold back. He was on the wrong track and I just knew I had to say something for the sake of the church. So right there in front of all the elders and deacons I told him why he was wrong.

Well that didn't happen, though I'm sure I got your attention. But that is pretty much what did happen between the two great Apostles, Paul and Peter. If we could ask Paul why he did that and why he wrote about it I think he would say he did it because what was at stake was pivotal for the future of the gospel and of the church at large.

When Paul had preached the gospel in the province of Galatia during his missionary journey he had made it crystal clear that salvation is by grace alone through Christ alone by faith alone. But after he left others began to undercut that message. They said, yes, believing in Jesus is important, but so is circumcision and so are other Jewish practices. They accused Paul of soft-pedaling the demands of the Christian faith so that he wouldn't offend the gentiles. As a result, the churches were beginning to pivot away from a gospel of Christ alone to Christ and circumcision, Christ and certain rituals and rites. Paul was so upset about the false teaching that he says, "If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned" (Gal. 1:9). Paul knew that turning in the direction of Christ, will lead you into a works righteousness cul-de-sac, a dead-end street that he knew all too well. That's why he told about the time he called out the Apostle Peter.

It happened at Antioch. After the martyrdom of Stephen persecution broke out and many believers fled from Jerusalem. Some who spoke Greek settled in Antioch about 300 miles north of Jerusalem in Syria. Before long a church sprang up there that included both Jews and Gentiles. It was there that the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians." Barnabas went there and he got Paul to come as well. They taught there for about a year and things were going along very well. The church was growing; Jewish and Gentile believers were worshiping and sharing meals and the Lord's Supper together. But then a group came from Jerusalem to check out this new church. When they saw the Jews and Gentiles acting as if they were brothers and sisters, they shamed the Jewish believers. How can you possibly eat with the uncircumcised Gentiles, they said. That's just not right, you are condemning yourselves. That was when Peter went off the tracks. He had shared meals with Gentile believers. You may recall that God had revealed to Peter in a dramatic vision that the old distinction between clean and unclean no longer applied. Following that vision he heard the profession of faith of a Roman centurion named Cornelius and he baptized him and his household. Peter told that story at the council in Jerusalem and convinced the other Apostles that Christ had destroyed the barrier that separated Jewish and Gentile believers. But when the group from Jerusalem showed up Peter weakened. He no longer ate with his Gentile brothers and sisters but only with the Jewish Christians, sending a message that in order to be a true Christian you had to practice Jewish customs.

Paul saw what was happening and then he saw red! In a devotional on this passage, Scott Hoezee pictures Paul getting right up into Peter's face and with every vein in his neck popping out he says "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?" You are a hypocrite, Peter! The word means literally a masked man. Under the mask Peter believed that Christ reconciles Jews and Gentiles

but he put on the mask of believing that circumcision is necessary in order to save face with the Jerusalem group.

What's wrong with you, Peter, Paul says. Don't you see what you are doing by your actions? You know as well as I do that God doesn't care a fig about Jewish customs. All God wants is faith in Christ. That's enough. Circumcision doesn't matter anymore. You know that, God told you that. Now you as a leader are sowing seeds of doubt. Your two-faced behavior is dangerous to the spiritual life of those who look up to you.

Confronting Peter that way and telling the believers in Galatia about it was warranted in Paul's mind because the door to the future of the gospel and the church pivoted on this question: Is Christ enough? Did the cross sort of reconcile God and man? Did it almost remove the ceremonial laws? Did it nearly set aside the distinctions between believers? Is the righteousness of Christ just about sufficient? Is 'we are saved by grace' an incomplete sentence? No, a thousand times no! Paul knew that any gospel other than Christ alone is nothing but a perversion (Galatians 1:6-7).

But for Paul this was not simply a matter of having correct theology. That was pivotal to be sure but the gospel of grace for him was also deeply personal. Beginning with verse 18 he uses the personal pronouns "I" or "me" no less than 12 times! The reason it was personal for him was his own past. In chapter one he says, "I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers" (Galatians 1:13-14). As far as he was concerned, Jesus was dead and gone, and good riddance! And then the unthinkable happened. The Christ he hated met him on the road to Damascus. He was not in a grave but very much alive, and that encounter changed not only Paul's theology but his life. "Through the law I died to the law that I might live for God," he says. I came to see that the law I thought could give me life was only bringing me death because I couldn't keep it no matter how hard I tried. But then I came to understand that Christ kept it for me and now I live in him and through him and for him. He puts this in a striking metaphor: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me." In other words, the old self has died and the new self is alive with the resurrection life of Christ. "The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."

I imagine him saying that to Peter with tears running down his cheeks. Peter, "the Son of God [whom you knew personally] loved me and gave himself for me." For me, Paul: the pretender, the persecutor, the blind man, the proud man, the hatemonger, the chief of sinners; the lost man. "He loved **me** and gave himself for **me**." For Paul it was pivotal to believe that "we are justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified." But the power in Paul's life that propelled him out into the world with an undying passion for Christ did not come just by having his doctrinal ducks in a row. The power came from a personal conviction, a personal awe that "the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me."

Make it personal tonight, say it to yourself: "the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me," for me with my pride and pettiness, my envy and jealousy, my superficial piety, my judgmental attitudes, my small-mindedness, my lack of love, my selfishness. "He loved me and gave himself for me." He left heaven for me. He humbled himself for me. He was despised and rejected for me. He suffered and died for me. He rose again for me. He's coming back for me. Friends, if it isn't personal, it probably isn't very powerful. As you come to the Lord's Table tonight let these words make their way from your head into your heart: "The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me." In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.