



The Life
**We Now
Live**

A Study of Grace
in Galatians

The Life We Now Live: A Study of Grace in Galatians Teacher's Manual

by C. J. Harris

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To the Teacher

I first studied through the Epistle to the Galatians over fifteen years ago, as a college student preparing for the ministry. Like most at that age, I wrestled with my impending adulthood and all it would entail—ministry, marriage, family, everything. How should I meet these challenges? How should I live as a child of God?

Not all of my questions have disappeared over time, but in those years God used Galatians to begin molding me beyond my knowledge. He showed me that, impossibly, I was crucified with Christ (2:20), and that the grace which saved me now also sanctifies me (3:2–3). I learned of the liberty the Spirit gives me as I walk with Him—the liberty to love, the liberty to serve, the liberty to know my majestic God (chapter 5). Soon, I learned that I could trust Christ’s work through me—that I could reflect, however imperfectly, God’s grace to my wife, my two sons, and whomever else I was called to serve.

Since college, I’ve been privileged to teach through this powerful letter several times, and I still see new wonders every time I gaze with my students through this window of God’s grace. I offer here a summary of our observations, trusting God to draw your gaze to Himself.

As you examine the life we now live in Christ, may He bless you with all the fruit of His grace.

By His grace alone,

CJ Harris

Titus 2:11–15

The Minister and the Gospel: Part 2

Objectives

- Understand the supremacy of the gospel message over the gospel messenger
- Review the doctrinal error represented by Peter's failure in Galatians 2
- Define our relationship with sin after salvation
- Appreciate Christ's complete work of justification

Text

Galatians 2:11–21

Teacher's Lesson

In the last lesson we discussed our role in testing the message of the gospel, as well as our responsibility to pursue biblical unity through the grace of Christ.

In the passage we'll discuss for this lesson, Paul shows that the messengers of the gospel are not above the message of the gospel. As we noted in the last lesson, God has commanded us to examine any teaching of the gospel, and when a so-called messenger of the gospel contradicts the word of Christ, he must be corrected.

Today we'll look at a disagreement between Paul and Peter, which Paul includes in this letter to illustrate how the corruption of the gospel can lead to disunity.

The Messengers of the Gospel Are Not Above the Message (2:11–21)

Many people don't like this passage. It has confused, excited, and infuriated scholars since the early years of the church. Christians often think of the apostles as nearly-perfect, saintly figures who spoke and taught in perfect unity, yet here and in Acts we find disagreements, even between people the Holy Spirit used to write Scripture.

Context

This passage has fueled debate and speculation among those who try to promote a false gospel. Roman Catholics, who believe that Peter was the first pope and therefore could not commit doctrinal errors, try to present this dispute as a trick—a sort of play that Paul and Peter acted out to demonstrate the value of unity to the early church. But if true, this would be the only example of trickery as a teaching method in the Bible. And we can find no evidence in Scripture that this dispute was anything but an honest disagreement.

Many liberal theologians, however, like to present this disagreement as a huge conflict between two branches of the early church. These scholars present an unsupported narrative of church history, claiming that the Paul-branch and the Peter-branch of the church fought each other until the Paul-branch of the church finally won out in the second century. Then, apparently, members of the Paul-branch re-wrote Paul's epistle to the Galatians and included this passage to show the value of unity. They supposedly thought that including an example of early conflict and resolution would smooth over any remaining disagreement.

Despite the lack of scriptural or historical basis for these views, many groups have used this passage to support their arguments for human authority or biblical error.

But today we'll look at this passage as the early church did—as Christians struggling to understand the importance of the gospel to everyday life.

The Confrontation Between Paul and Peter (vv. 11–14)

Read Galatians 2:11–14. If any person in history could have claimed importance or authority greater than the gospel, it would have been Peter. He was one of Christ's closest followers and the *de facto* leader of the early believers. Jesus said He would build His church on the testimony Peter made, and it was Peter who preached at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit first appeared to believers.

But Paul shows in this passage that even Peter, the supposed super-saint, could distort the gospel by mistake. Here Peter had fellowshiped with a group of Gentile Christians in Antioch, eating and talking with them. But when some Jewish Christians arrived, Peter reverted to Jewish tradition, refusing to eat with the Gentiles and acting aloof. Worse yet, Peter's example led the other Jews to act hypocritically, as well. Peter had forgotten the same unity he had preached about in Jerusalem.

This public sin required a public correction, so Paul confronted Peter before all the others, pointing out his hypocrisy and the disunity it created. Even Peter could not reject the unity created by the gospel.

Context

This situation brings to mind the Donatist controversy in the fourth century. During the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, Christians faced horrific persecution—perhaps the worst in Roman history. Near the end of Diocletian’s reign, however, he allowed Christians a way to save themselves from imprisonment or execution. If they renounced Christ and made an offering to the emperor, thereby re-entering the official religion of Rome, they would receive their freedom.

Many Christians refused, and therefore lost their lives. But some did recant Christ and return to society, distraught and broken. Unfortunately, when the church most needed unity in Christ, a group of believers had fallen and removed themselves from the body.

But after the Emperor Constantine came to power, he professed Christianity and ended all official persecution of Christians. The church grew, as previously secret Christians could now share their faith publicly. Even some of the Christians that had recanted during Diocletian’s reign came back to the church.

But some Christians couldn’t accept their brothers and sisters back into the fold. A group of North African bishops called the Donatists taught that if a believer ever recanted Christ, they could never be allowed back into a church, nor could they take part in any ordinances, such as communion. Furthermore, any Christian who had been baptized by a preacher that had later recanted must be re-baptized.

This teaching reflected many doctrinal errors, but perhaps the most serious was the elevation of the gospel messenger over the gospel. A person does not accept Christ and share that acceptance through baptism by the power of his preacher. He does not lose his salvation because his preacher, or gospel messenger, commits a heinous sin. The gospel’s power does not depend on its messengers.

Thankfully, a group of church leaders convened to discuss the re-admission of recanting believers back into the fold. They condemned the Donatists for rejecting the grace of God to forgive and redeem His children.

Discussion

It’s easy to see where the Donatists rejected the power of the gospel, but looking back to this passage, where do you think Peter went wrong?

Peter Separated from Fellow Believers Because of Fear (vv. 11–12)

We sin by motive before we sin by action. Peter feared the disapproval of other people, and until the arrival of the strict Jewish believers, he had no problem fellowshiping with the Gentile believers. But as soon as these others arrived, he broke unity. He wanted the approval of those that revered Jewish tradition over Christian unity.

Application

We should never attack the fellowship of the Spirit. We need not cooperate with every venture by every church, but we should not attack the genuine efforts of others who truly preach Christ. We can offer reasons from the Scripture why we disagree with their methods or philosophy, and we can certainly sharpen each other through fellowship in the Word. But we must maintain unity in the same love Christ showed us.

Peter's Example Led Others to Break Unity (v. 13)

Paul's example led other believers to reject the unity they had in Christ. They simply assumed that if Peter broke fellowship, it was OK for them to do the same. Even Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement and Paul's good friend, fell into the same trap.

Peter's hypocrisy lacked grace, unity, and love, and it spread quickly.

Peter Misrepresented the Gospel (v. 14)

Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:7 that Christ saved us in order to show us the immeasurable riches of God's grace. And He uses us to share that grace with others here on Earth.

So when we create unnecessary division and strife, placing chasms where Christ built bridges, we commit a grievous sin against God and the work He accomplished through Jesus. If Christ came and suffered and died to bind us together in God's grace, how dare we corrupt His gospel by trying to rip those bonds apart?

Ultimately, Peter was wrong because he painted a false picture of the gospel. Of course he didn't do so on purpose, but he gave others the idea that the gospel was for some people, but not so much for others.

Application

We can do the same thing when we let our culture get in the way of biblical unity. Rules and standards are helpful for a church body, but people who don't conform to them should not receive any less love. It's easier to hang out with other Christians who practice their faith the same way we do, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't show grace to those with whom we disagree.

Paul says in verse 14 that Peter's actions were not consistent with the truth of the gospel. Peter believed that salvation was based on faith in Christ alone. But his actions added other requirements to Christian unity—like culture, practice, and race. And those requirements made it impossible for Peter to serve Gentile believers in love.

Application

Again, this isn't to say we shouldn't have standards or rules of conduct in a church. We must have strong, biblical reasons for what we do (Rom. 14:22–23). Otherwise, we can find ways to justify almost any sinful practice.

But unbelievers should not look at us and find reason to criticize Christ. They should not see us tearing each other down over petty differences. Instead, they should see first what unifies us—the gospel of Christ.

Grace is available to all Christians—but do our actions reflect that belief?

The Gospel Proclaims Justification by Grace Through Faith (vv. 15–21)

Read Galatians 2:15–21. Paul concludes his defense by restating the truth of the gospel—we are justified in God's sight only by grace through faith.

Justification Comes by Grace Through Faith Alone, Not by Works (vv. 15–16)

Some so-called Christians add to this faith. Some groups say that we are saved by faith, which *supplements* our works. According to these teachers, we can't quite work our way to heaven, so faith boosts us the rest of the way. Essentially, they think salvation is a tag-team effort between God and us.

Being Religious Is Not Enough (v. 15)

But spirituality and religion cannot save us. Paul writes in verse 15 that he, like all Jews, will not be justified by his religion or ethnicity, no more than the Gentiles would be saved by theirs.

Religion—even if taught in kindness, even if it gives comfort, even if it includes great truth—will not save us from our sin.

We Are Justified by Grace Through Faith—Period

Again, here's where many so-called Christian groups differ from the Bible. Some say, "Do good, believe, and you'll find salvation." But Paul writes instead that we must believe first, and only then will God give us salvation and a chance to glorify Him.

No One Will Ever Be Justified by Works

Context

Read Revelation 20:12–15. In this passage, John gives us a glimpse of the final judgment, where God judges everyone not redeemed by His Son, Christ. And the criteria for this judgment? Their works—everything they've ever done, all recorded and recounted without error. And every single one of these people—by his or her own merit—falls into eternal punishment.

We cannot be saved through the Law—because we’ve all broken it. Even one sin is a violation of the entire Law. So when we try to keep the Law, we run into constant reminders that we’re sinners. That way leads only to death. But Christ offers us a new way—through faith.

Read Romans 1:16–17. Here Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4, as he argues that we cannot find true righteousness and salvation, except by faith. Only God, in His grace, can set us on the path of the redeemed. We could never find it on our own.

Sin’s Presence Does Not Contradict the Gospel of Grace (vv. 17–19)

But some of Paul’s readers might protest, “What about those Christians that sin? If the gospel is so great, why do believers keep doing bad things?”

Paul addresses this in verse 17. The fact that believers sin does not mean that Christ is somehow a participant in sin. The Holy Spirit lives in believers, but that doesn’t mean He goes along with our wrongdoing.

When Christians Sin, They Submit to an Old Master

Let’s say your boss at work is fired, and he’s replaced with a new manager. If your former boss shows up again and begins telling you what to do, do you listen to him? Or do you follow the new boss and her orders?

Because of Christ, two things are true for the believer:

- Sin is defeated.
- Sin is a choice, not a necessity.

Christ destroyed sin’s power when He died and rose again. Death and sin once again bowed to His throne.

So by God’s grace, Christians no longer live under the power of sin (Rom. 6:14). Yet we will often submit to it anyway, because sin feels comfortable, secure, pleasurable. We can quench the Holy Spirit’s influence in our heart, leaving us cold and hardened (1 Thess. 5:19).

But Christ didn’t save us to sin. He freed us so that we could rise from our old chains, live free in Him, and glorify His Father.

We Are Dead to Sin, But We Can Still Long for It

In verses 18 and 19, Paul describes our relationship with sin and the Law as if it were a marriage that ended with our death. We were bound to our sin forever, but through Christ, we’ve died to sin and been reborn to live with Him. We’re freed from the bondage of our old relationship, and now we can begin a new, better one.

But the echoes of our old relationship can still affect us. It can keep us from fully embracing the love and grace of Christ. We feel that we need the security or pleasure of our old ways, or that we deserve the hurt that our old patterns bring us.

There's part of our sin nature that still longs for the old person we used to be. But now, we have Someone in us that resists it—the Holy Spirit of God.

Our Justification Is Complete in Christ (vv. 20–21)

Paul makes one final point in this chapter—our justification as believers is complete in Christ. While the Judaizers say there are other things we must do to be right before God, Paul writes here that our justification is found in Christ alone.

So when we live righteously—obeying God and reflecting His love—it's because Christ lives in us, and we want to glorify Him by letting Him live through us. We don't *earn* anything.

Many Christians struggle with the assurance of their salvation—that is, whether they are truly saved. Still more Christians wonder if they can keep doing enough good for God to still love them.

In this passage, God used Paul to assure us of where we Christians stand. Essentially, God says, "I've replaced the sin I see in your life with the righteousness of My perfect Son, Christ. When I look at you, I see Christ's holiness."

Every good thing we do after our salvation is an act of worship and thanksgiving—not an act of merit, not a way to buy God's love or favor. We simply respond to His love with our own.

The following are four reminders Paul includes in this final argument of the chapter.

Our Death to Sin Is a Fact (v. 20a)

Paul says without qualification that he, as a believer, was crucified with Christ. This is a statement of fact—not a feeling, not a fad, not a dimly-remembered experience. When we trust in Christ's work on the cross, our relationship with God changes forever, no matter what.

Our Death to Sin Allowed Us Life in Christ (v. 20b)

Our death to sin and our life in Christ are both *vicarious*—that is, Christ accomplished them for us. Christ died for us on the cross, paying the penalty for our sin. And today Christ lives for us, showing His grace and love through our lives.

Every Christian will show gratitude for Christ's vicarious death, but fewer realize the vicarious life we have because of Him. And this beautiful, life-filled relationship was possible only by severing our bondage to sin.

Our Life Is Lived Only by Faith (v. 20c)

Faith is essential for salvation, but it's equally essential for living our new life in Christ. By faith we know that Christ lives through us, and by faith we trust Him to give us the grace we need each day.

Christ loved us and died for us—we had to understand that before becoming His children. So it shouldn't be so difficult to trust Christ with every moment of our new life.

All Other Ways Ignore True Grace (v. 21)

In verse 21, Paul uses the Greek word *atheteo*, which is often translated “frustrate” or “nullify.” The term carries the idea of setting something aside, or making something have no effect. It's like throwing your umbrella away when you're outside in a rainstorm, or like removing the engine from your car.

Paul warns the Galatians here that if they choose to follow these false teachers and attempt to grow spiritually by doing good things, they set aside, or frustrate, or nullify, the grace of God. They reject His help. They replace His work with their own. In effect, Paul writes at the end of verse 21, Christ might as well not have died.

We must trust Christ to live through us. To live any other way is to ignore grace.

Quiz Answer Key

1. According to Galatians 2, whose hypocrisy did Paul have to correct publicly?
Peter
2. What form did this person's hypocrisy take?
C. He ate with Gentiles one day, then ignored them when Jewish believers were around.
3. What was the *worst* problem with this hypocrisy?
B. It misrepresented the gospel.
4. Which of the following points did Paul use to explain why Christians can still sin?
A. When Christians sin, they submit to an old form of bondage, even though they don't need to.
5. In Philippians 1, how did Paul find grace in the disagreements between Christians?
Answers will vary. See Philippians 1:14–18. Paul was comforted in that whether by pretense or in truth, the gospel of Christ was proclaimed.