**Live by the Truth of the Gospel**

September 22, 2019

Galatians 2:1-21

Key Verse 2:5 “We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.”

In this world, there are so many religions. Because man is made in the image of God, man seeks God. Since the law of God is written in his heart, man has a sense of fear when he violates that law: fear of the Judge, the God who made him. That is what it means to be a human. So man has a yearning desire to be right with God. Even though there are so many religions, there are only two religions: the true religion, which God has revealed in the Bible, that salvation comes by faith in Jesus Christ; and all other false religions, which declare that salvation comes to man by his own effort, by his own achievement, by something he does – some morality, some ritual, or some ceremony. In chapter 1, we learned that the Galatian church was thrown into confusion by the teachings of false believers, who claimed that Gentile Christians had to be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses in order to be saved. They were teaching a false gospel. Paul strongly defended his gospel which he has received from the Risen Jesus himself by divine revelation. So Paul encouraged the Galatians to hold on to the true gospel, whose origin is God. In chapter 2, Paul continues his defense of the truth of the gospel. Namely, (1) Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is enough for our salvation. Nothing else is necessary; (2) In Christ there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. God does not show favoritism.

Look at verses 1-4. “Then after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves.” The influence of the circumcision group was very strong. Claiming to carry the authority of the apostles, they came to Antioch and threw the Gentile believers there into confusion about the gospel. Paul harshly labels them as “false believers” whose true motive was not to please God but to enslave Christians under the yoke of Jewish legalism. They were envious of the freedom that Christians enjoyed in Christ, which opposed their self-righteous value system. They said, “Now you believe in Jesus Christ and were saved. In order to achieve full salvation, you need to be circumcised.” This brought them into sharp dispute with Paul, who wasn’t willing to compromise with them at all. Was Paul being too critical? Couldn’t he have just let Gentiles be circumcised to make everyone happy? No! The very heart of the gospel was at stake!

Look at verse 5. “We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.” Paul was always humble enough to submit himself to small cultural differences in order to win people over to Christ (1 Cor 9:20-22). But requiring Gentile believers to be circumcised was different because it would tear out the heart of the gospel message: that all are saved only by faith in Christ. To prove his point, Paul brought with him Titus, a Greek, as a shining example of how Gentiles were being changed into sincere believers, filled with the Holy Spirit. When Titus shared his life testimony before them, they could only praise God for what he was doing.

During his meeting in Jerusalem, Paul shared his version of the gospel with the apostles in private. The apostles responded with a loud “Amen!” They added nothing to his message because it was neither lacking nor inaccurate (6). On the contrary, they saw that the same God that was working so powerfully among them to minister to the Jews was working powerfully through Paul among the Gentiles (7-8). Titus was direct evidence of this. Look at verse 9. “James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised.” What a beautiful display of Christian fellowship! What humility, openness and cooperation! Though their strategies and their mission fields were very different, they saw one God, one Christ, one Spirit and one gospel uniting the Church. At the 2018 international summer Bible conference, we saw God working in many different nations. We heard people say “Amen” in many different languages: In Russian, “Amin,” In China, “Amun.” In North American, “Ai-men.” In Korean, it is “Amen.” We should recognize God’s work in them and accept them as brothers and sisters in Christ.

After this historic meeting between Paul and the apostles, the early church began to treat Jews and Gentiles as equals. This transition wasn’t comfortable for many, but was supported by leaders like Peter. In fact, Peter was one of the first missionaries sent to the Gentiles when God led him to preach the gospel to Cornelius in Caesarea (Acts 10). Following this event, Peter became one of the most vocal advocates for Gentile believers. When he visited Paul’s church in Antioch, he overcame his deeply-ingrained prejudices to sit with Gentile believers and eat freely with them. It was a beautiful picture of the kingdom of God, just as Jesus had prayed for. But Peter’s good intentions were quickly tested by an unexpected event. Look at verses 11-13. “When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 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. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.” What happened? In a moment of weakness, Peter was controlled by fear. He was more concerned about pleasing those from the circumcision group, who claimed to have authority from James, rather than pleasing God. His actions were incredibly hypocritical. He lived his life as though he was set free from the law and he proclaimed salvation through faith in Christ, yet here he was, distinguishing Jew from Gentile. It didn’t take long for the younger Jewish believers, like Barnabas, to follow their hero, Peter. Suddenly the Gentile believers felt like second-class members of the church and a division was developing in the church.

Paul couldn’t just let this slide, for Peter’s actions were not “in line with the truth of the gospel” (14). A public rebuke was necessary, even if it was difficult. Look at verses 15-16. “We who are Jews by birth and not Gentiles sinners know that a man 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.” In the Bible (Acts 15), “saved, accepted, purified,” are used as synonyms to “justified.” It is the opposite of condemnation. The quest for justification or righteousness is the main question of all major religions. All other religions besides Christianity say that this can be obtained by one’s good deeds or moral integrity. But look at verse 16 again. Paul uses the terms “faith in Christ” and “the works of the law” three times each to clarify that justification is obtained not by human works or effort, but only by faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Seeing that our salvation does not lie within ourselves, our only response is to cry out for help. What we failed to do in that we could not keep God’s righteous laws, Christ did for us by coming to the earth as a man and fully paying the price for all of our sins, past, present and future on the cross with his own blood. I like to think of it this way: the blood of Jesus is both necessary and sufficient to justify sinners. Necessary because no one could be justified if Jesus had not laid down his life for us. And sufficient because we do not need to add anything to Jesus’ sacrifice; it alone is mighty to save. Then does Jesus’ sacrifice justify us automatically, without any response on our part? No! The key is faith. While the voice of unbelief says, “I can handle this on my own,” the voice of faith says, “Lord, help me!” Once there was an exploration team walking through a dangerous jungle. Suddenly, the leader of the group found himself sinking in a giant pit of quicksand. His colleagues immediately tossed him a rope, but he was too proud to take hold of it. “I can handle this,” he said. But the more he struggled on his own, the further down he sank. In a matter of minutes, he was swallowed up, never to be seen again. What a fool! Why didn’t he accept help when he had the chance? Likewise, we are powerless to save ourselves from sin and death. The only escape rope we have is to put our faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The law can only point out that the quicksand is very dangerous, but it has no power to save us.

In God’s eyes, there are only two kinds of people: those who are justified through their faith in Christ and those that stand condemned due to their lack of faith. Their lives are very different. Those with faith in Christ have the inmost desire to follow Christ’s footsteps to glorify God. They see true greatness not in themselves, but only in God, in whom they find real satisfaction. To God’s great pleasure, they willingly lay down their lives to advance God’s kingdom. God rewards such faith by forgiving that person’s sins and declaring them righteous by the blood of Christ. But surprisingly, many Christians suffer under the weight of self-reliance and self-condemnation rather than enjoying the peace we have in Jesus. They think that salvation by faith means that they have to have perfect faith. Because of this, when their doubts, sins and short-comings are exposed before God, they feel miserable, not knowing whether they are really saved or not. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” Our salvation is 100% the work of God through Jesus Christ. Even our faith is the gift of God.

Paul knew that some would misunderstand the freedom we have in Christ and would even accuse Jesus of promoting sin. Of course, this is not true at all. As Paul’s life exemplifies, faith in Jesus actually transforms us into new creations that live radically changed lives that truly honor God. Look at verses 19-20. “For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” At one time, Paul was a murderous Jew named Saul. In his religious zeal, he persecuted the Christian church. Though he was advancing quickly among his peers, this lifestyle ultimately left him empty inside. But when Christ met him and called him to a new life of faith in the gospel, the self-righteous and self-centered Saul died and humble, loving, God-exalting Paul was born. The world and everything he had built his life upon through his religious zeal suddenly became garbage. He realized he had been living in sin apart from Christ. He completely died to the idea that he could find salvation in the law and in himself. So he left his old life in the dust to embrace eternal life in Jesus.

Not only did Paul die to his old self, he crucified himself. As we know, crucifixion is unbearably painful and horrific. We don’t even like to think about it. But Paul saw his old self, Saul, as being nailed onto the cross right beside Jesus. Crucifying our old way of life means self-denial to repent of our sinful ideas and habits, even those that we don’t want to let go of. It isn’t pretty or fun. It doesn’t happen automatically but takes willingness and commitment. It involves real suffering and shame, even as Jesus endured. But what is the outcome? Paul says, “...but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” A Christian apologist Alex McFarland wrote a book, “10 Answers for Skeptics.” He said, “The road to skepticism always begins with emotional pain. As I interviewed atheists, my heart went out to so many of them who tearfully told about their perception of unanswered prayers, loved ones who weren’t healed of terminal illnesses, toxic experiences in church and respected Christian leaders who in some way let them down.” Many skeptics resolutely train themselves to see the world through the eyes of unbelief because of disappointment with God through some past experience. We need simple faith that the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me even in emotional pain. That same simple faith in Christ justifies us. It is the same simple faith that enables us to live our new lives as Christians. As we commit ourselves to following Jesus in all things, the love of Christ drastically changes us from the inside so that we can have a living, dynamic relationship with God. We put Jesus on the throne of our heart, and he becomes the driving force behind all our decisions. In fact, Jesus himself begins to live in and through us, and we become like miniature versions of Jesus. We become deeply united with his heart to glorify God and grow to imitate his sacrificial love for sinners.

Today we learned the truth of the gospel. Namely, (1) Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is enough for our salvation. Nothing else is necessary; (2) In Christ there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. God does not show favoritism. May God bless you to live according to the truth of the gospel by the simple faith in the Son of God, who loved you and gave himself for you.