

BIGOTRY DISTORTS THE GOSPEL

GALATIANS 2:11-14

THE GOSPEL CROSSES ALL ETHNIC, RACIAL, SOCIAL, AND GENDER BOUNDARIES. ANY CONFUSION ABOUT THAT IS A PERVERSION OF THE GOSPEL.

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Bigotry Distorts the Gospel

Galatians 2:11-14

Last time we were together, we saw that God had Paul contact the Apostles in Jerusalem to explain the specific mission Jesus sent him on. It seems from the tone of the passage that Paul was not so anxious to humble himself or to make himself accountable to the Jerusalem Church. However, the meeting went well. The Apostles immediately recognized Jesus' hand all over the ministry and sent Paul away with their blessings and their support. In general, they agreed that Paul had been commissioned to reach Gentiles, while the Apostles were commissioned to reach Jews. However, as a whole, the church was responsible to reach all people groups throughout the world.

One of the important points of the meeting was that the church should remain united in fellowship. In other words, they were to care for the poor among them. This morning we will see that bigotry and prejudices are a real threat to the unity of the church.

My feeling is that most of us who attend Devon Church are not prejudiced since our church is so multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-denominational. However, my feeling is that we can't help but have some preconceived notions that are stereotypical.

Let me give you an example. A young American found himself seated next to a Chinese Diplomat. Not knowing what to say to a Chinese person, the young man pointed to the soup and said, "You likee soupee?" The Chinese Diplomat nodded. "You likee steakee?" said the American? Again, the Chinese nodded. The American thought he was really doing well. He said, "You likee drinkee?" Again the Chinese Diplomat nodded.

Later on in the evening, the Chinese Diplomat was called on to deliver the keynote address. He delivered the speech in flawless Oxford English. He returned to the table, looked at the young American and said, "You likee speechee?"

Look, I believe that none of us that attend church here are intentionally prejudiced. But if we want to grow, we really need to examine our preconceived notions so that we can grow as individuals and as a blended community.

Let me again remind us that it is going to be difficult to make this idea relevant to us today because we are 2,000 years removed from this situation. Normally, we can draw out a universal principal and then apply to our lives. However, the situation Paul is addressing in this portion of Galatians is a unique situation.

The situation is this. God chose Abraham to be the father of the Hebrew nation around 2,000 B.C. So for 2,000 years, the Hebrews journeyed through history as God's Chosen People when Jesus enters human history. Jesus claimed to be the Jewish Messiah. He claimed to usher in the Messianic Age. Jesus ministered primarily to Jews so most of the early Christians were Jewish. The Jews who gave their lives to Jesus in faith considered themselves to be the very special portion of God's Chosen People. They considered themselves to be Messianic Jews. In other words, they were still politically, socially, and religiously Jewish. There was still this idea of being special.

On the other hand, way back when God called Abraham, His ultimate goal was that all nations of the earth would be blessed and come to be reconciled with God through the Messianic Ministry. Jesus set apart the Apostle Paul to reach the non-Jews with the Gospel Message; that God was reconciling human beings with Himself through the sacrifice of Jesus. To the Jews, the whole rest of the world was considered Gentiles. So when we read the word Gentiles in this letter, we must understand this as all people in the world who were not religiously, socially, and politically Jewish. It was the desire of Jesus to blend both of these groups into one family. The new family of God would be Jews and Gentiles who received Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Religious, social, political, racial, or ethnic bigotry is a threat to the unity of the Body of Christ. In other words, for us, the closest we can come to a parallel with this situation is the main idea of this

morning's text. The gospel crosses all ethnic, racial, social, and gender boundaries. Any confusion about that is a perversion of the gospel.

Again, all of you who know me know that I am paranoid about misusing a text to prove something. So let me lay out the Biblical issue once more. Keep in mind, the Christian movement is less than 20 years old when these issues surface. Jews and Gentiles had a long history of hating and mistrusting one another. Add to that there were Jews who hated other types of Jews and Gentiles who hated other Gentiles. Now it seems that God has approached all groups through the Person and Ministry of Jesus Christ.

Jesus died so that all people could be in a right relationship with God. Here is what is interesting. When all these groups received Jesus as Lord and Savior, God sent them the Holy Spirit. It seems that they manifested this by speaking in tongues. Further, they were all baptized with water in the name of The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit. This would make it very difficult for them to deny one another's faith. The problem was that since the Jewish believers were in the majority, they were trying to get all new believers to submit to the Jewish religious, social, and political customs, beliefs, and laws. The confusion would present itself practically like this, "In order to be an authentic Christian, would one also have to become a Jew as well?" The problem becomes that people are adding to the Gospel message. In other words, it would take faith in Jesus plus conversion to Judaism to be saved. This is a clear perversion to the Gospel.

Now I have taken this and applied it to our different prejudices because for the Jew, there was no separation between their religious, social, and political lives. I think that we all feel that our approach and interpretation of life and Christianity are the right ones. We want people to conform to our ideas, our way of praying, our way of worshiping, and our way of interpreting the Bible.

Even though are very good at blending our community under the Lordship of Jesus, we need to keep a close watch on our thoughts.

I. BIGOTRY MUST BE ADDRESSED (VS 11)

Sometimes Confrontation Is Necessary In Order To Preserve Unity.

Verse 11 reminds us that bigotry must be addressed. Sometimes confrontation is necessary in order to preserve unity. Many of us come from backgrounds where we avoid conflict at all cost. We are uncomfortable with it. In one sense, that's good. We would be real jerks if we went around saying what we wanted and went around confronting people who did things differently than we do. However, there are some issues that need to be confronted to protect the unity and health of a community. Prejudice is one of those issues.

A. THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH

It seems that shortly after the meeting Peter found himself in the city of Antioch. Keep in mind, James the brother of John had been executed. Peter had been arrested and miraculously delivered out of jail by an angel. Perhaps it was too hot in Jerusalem so Peter may have taken the opportunity to go visit the church in Antioch. Let me read how Luke describes this church in his book of Acts;

¹⁹ Meanwhile, the believers who had fled from Jerusalem during the persecution after Stephen's death traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the Good News, but only to Jews. ²⁰ However, some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The power of the Lord was upon them, and large numbers of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.

²² When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw this proof of God's favor, he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord. ²⁴ Barnabas was a good

man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. And large numbers of people were brought to the Lord.

²⁵ Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to find Saul. ²⁶ When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching great numbers of people. (It was there at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians)" (Acts 11:19-26/NLT).

This church in Antioch was comprised of Jews and all sorts of Gentiles. They were a very healthy body of believers. In fact they sent out and supported missionaries. They also took up a collection to send to the Jerusalem Church to help the poor. The important point about this church is that they were enjoying fellowship with one another because of their love for Jesus and one another. It is interesting that the unbelieving world gave them the pejorative nickname "Christian" which means "Little Christs." In other words, they were all "mini-me's" of Jesus. Even though this nickname was meant to be an insult, it was actually a compliment to them. And we identify ourselves today as Christians. At any rate, it seems that Peter spends an extended period of time with this church. And further, as we see later, he was enjoying his time there by fellowshiping with everyone.

B. THE CONFRONTATION

In the next phrase of verse 11, we are informed of the confrontation. There are two things about this confrontation. First of all, it is not pretty. The word Paul uses to describe the confrontation is a military term. The word *opposed* means to engage the enemy in a military battle. It is also used of political attacks. This is a rebuke.

Secondly, it is not done behind Peter's back nor is it done in a letter, over the phone, or in an email. This confrontation takes place face-to-face. Paul takes on this confrontation in person. Peter will have a chance to argue back or admit his mistake. This confrontation is very public.

One of the things we need to learn as Bible students is that the Bible records the event and its description is true and accurate. However, we are not always supposed to imitate the characters. Even though what Paul says is true, he often says and does things in a manner that would not be acceptable today in our culture.

C. THE IMPORTANCE

However, in Paul's defense, we must not underestimate the importance of this issue. In order for the church to survive, it must overcome racial, religious, social, political, and superstitious prejudices. We will see that Peter's actions are a real threat not only to the unity of the church but the very existence of the church. This issue is so important that it is necessary to confront the issue.

Before we engage in this type of confrontation, we need to make sure that the issue is one that threatens the unity or existence of the church. Even though these types of confrontation should be rare, sometimes confrontation is necessary in order to preserve unity.

II. BIGOTRY CAUSES CONFUSION (VS 12-13)

Prejudice Causes Unity To Be Broken And The Gospel To Be Distorted.

In verses 12-13, we will see that the issue is that bigotry causes confusion. In other words, prejudice causes unity to be broken and the gospel to be distorted.

A. ENJOYING FELLOWSHIP (12a)

The first half of verse 12 paints a picture of Peter enjoying full fellowship with the church in Antioch. In other words, Peter was eating, worshiping, socializing, and fellowshiping with everyone in the

church. That means that Peter was interacting with Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. In other words, they were united simply by their faith in Jesus and submission to His Lordship. This was significant, especially for Peter. Peter had kept kosher all his life. Now he was eating at the same table as Gentiles. This act in itself would be breaking the kosher laws. He was associating with people who be looked down on by Jews. At any rate, it seems that Peter was doing fine before "certain men came from James."

B. FEAR THREATENS FELLOWSHIP (12b)

And that brings us to the second half of verse 12 where we learn that fear threatens fellowship. Here is what seems to have happened. Some men from the Jerusalem Church come to Antioch. When they show up, Peter got up and separated himself from the Gentile believers. Let's look at some of these words. The word for *draw back* is a military word that means to retreat and to draw back to a safe position. And the word *separate* was a religious term that meant to stay away from things that could contaminate. So it seems that once these men from Jerusalem appeared, Peter withdrew to a safe religious, social, and cultural position. He separated himself from the Gentiles so that he appeared not to be interacting with them. Peter wanted to appear religiously pure and clean.

I think if we look at the life of Peter, we can understand that he is not really a coward. He just becomes easily confused, and that confusion causes him to lose courage. For example, the night Jesus was arrested, Peter acted courageously. He grabbed a sword, started swinging it wildly at trained soldiers. He ended up cutting off some poor servant's ear. Jesus rebuked Peter. Later that night, Peter ended up denying even knowing Jesus. One night on a rough sea when all the disciples were scared out of their minds, Jesus came walking to them on the water. Courageously, Peter asked Jesus if he could try walking on the water as well. While Peter was walking on the water, it was hard for him to make sense of it. He felt the wind and the water in his face, he got confused, scared, and started to sink. Peter stood up to the religious and political leaders. He preached Christ boldly and didn't back down. There was no question about what was right and wrong.

But here in Antioch, he got confused again. At first, he boldly followed his heart. It seemed right to him that Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians were equals and belong to the family of God as equal partners. He put aside all his preconceived notions and prejudices and enjoyed full fellowship. But when his fellow Jews arrived from Jerusalem, he started to get confused.

Now keep this in mind. There were all sorts of Jews who became Christians. Here in Antioch, there were Jews who were in full fellowship with Gentiles. There was a group of Jewish Christians who were adamant about the fact that Gentiles should be circumcised and follow Jewish religious, social, and political laws. You see legalists always sound more righteous. So when Peter saw them, he became confused and retreated from his bold new position.

When Paul went to meet Peter, James, and John in Jerusalem, the question was, "How should Gentile Christians fit into the church? Do they have to be circumcised?" Here the question in Antioch is, "How do Jewish Christians have to act? Do they have any right to force their views on Gentile Christians?"

I think the closest we could come to Peter's situation in our day would be something like this. Let's say you are an African American and have a lot of friends in our church. We may be out socially and all of a sudden, some of your African American friends show up. These friends may be very Anti-Anglo or Anti-Asian. Immediately you become intimidated and withdraw from our table.

It could be the same for whites who are out socially with a multi-ethnic group and some of your more racist white friends show up and you withdraw.

Most Christian young people face this kind of conflict at school. Perhaps there are some very unpopular kids at school. You know in your heart that God wants you to befriend them, especially if they are Christian. You befriend them because you know it is the right thing to do. But when the popular kids come along, especially some who know you, you withdraw from the unpopular kids because you want to be in the popular group.

We face these problems when we know we are supposed to fellowship with different races, ethnicities, cultures, and socio-economic groups. We must never withdraw, no matter how scared or

confused we are, because it sends the wrong message about Who Jesus is. We must always keep in mind that we are children of God. We are Jesus' "mini-me's." We bear the family name, *Christian*. Jesus came to die for every tribe, every nation, every tongue, and every socio-economic group. If we indeed name the Name of Jesus as our Lord and Savior, then we are blood relatives. We are bound together by the blood of Jesus. In the church, there should be no prejudice of any kind. We are equals at the foot of the cross.

C. BROKEN FELLOWSHIP (13)

Verse 13 describes the broken fellowship. What makes this so horrible is that these Jewish men from Jerusalem do not hold a higher position in the church than Peter. Peter is arguably the head of the Christian Church. If he is not the head, he is certainly one of the top three. If Peter is confused about this issue and he breaks fellowship with the Gentile Christians, it would be easy to see how those who recognize him as a leader could be confused. In fact, that's what happens.

The other Jewish Christians who had been in this Antioch Church for a long time, enjoying the fellowship of Gentile Christians now themselves become confused. How ironic is this? These Jewish believers started the church in Antioch and brought these Gentiles to faith in Christ and brought them into fellowship are now making the Gentiles second-class citizens in the church. In fact, by their withdrawal, they are indicating that the Gentile Christians are not yet authentic Christians. They are denying what they were originally preaching.

Paul calls it what it is, hypocrisy! Peter is a hypocrite! The Jewish Christians that followed Peter are hypocrites! Barnabas ends up being a hypocrite! The word hypocrite in Greek literally refers to play actors. They are merely pretending to be Christians. If we were to go back and read through the Gospels, the one group of people Jesus has no use for is religious hypocrites. If we claim to be Christians and yet look down on people who are less educated, less successful, who are a different color, culture, or socio-economic group than we are, then we are just pretend Christians.

Jesus said that the world would recognize that we belong to Him if we love one another. That means all believers, not just Christians who happen to be the same color or class we are. My guess is that most people who come here to church week after week are not intentionally prejudiced but we must be careful to keep on checking our preconceived notions because prejudice causes unity to be broken and the gospel to be distorted. It takes a great deal of conviction, humility, and courage to build the type of community God expects.

III. BIGOTRY IS IRRATIONAL (VS 14) ***We Often Expect People To Live Better Than We Do.***

In the end, as spelled out in verse 14, bigotry is irrational. It really makes no sense; especially if we understand the message of the Gospel is that we are saved by grace through faith alone. The problem is this. We often expect people to live better than we do. Isn't that interesting? We can often see bad behavior in others while we are blind to it in our own lives?

A. A CAUSE FOR CONFRONTATION (14a)

The first phrase in verse 14 names a cause for confrontation. God led Peter to convert Cornelius and his family to Christianity. They were Gentiles. In Jerusalem, Peter agreed with Paul that God indeed was working in saving the Gentiles apart from converting them to the Jewish way of life. The Gospel message was that people are brought into a right relationship with God simply by trusting Jesus; plus or minus nothing. By publicly withdrawing from the Gentile Christians, Peter and the other Jewish believers were saying that these Gentile believers were not really saved, or if they were saved, then they were second-class citizens in the Kingdom of God. By their actions, they were adding to the salvation requirements. They were saying that Gentiles had to become Jews in

addition to placing their faith in Jesus in order to be saved or at least to become full partners. This is clearly a distortion of the Gospel message.

B. A PUBLIC CONFRONTATION (14b)

The second phrase in verse 14 reminds us that for public sins, a public confrontation is necessary. If a church leader is sexually immoral and many people know it, he or she must be confronted publicly. If a church leader is pilfering funds, he or she must be confronted publicly. Public sin that threatens the health and unity of the church must be confronted publicly. Paul had no choice but to confront this sin publicly. Peter had to be publicly rebuked. Peter would have to acknowledge his sin and the damage it was causing in order to restore unity to this church. Before Peter got there, this church was functioning according to God's plan. Peter threatened the existence of that church by his actions. Paul had to confront this publicly. Peter had to repent of this publicly.

C. A NECESSARY CONFRONTATION (14c)

The last phrase in verse 14 illustrates why this was a necessary confrontation. Paul points out the irrationality of the whole thing. Paul says to Peter that Peter himself can't live according to the law. And besides, before the people from Jerusalem arrived, he was in fact breaking the law. Now that these people from Jerusalem have arrived, Peter pretends that he has been keeping the law all along.

Here is the interesting thing about legalistic Christians. They are extremely judgmental of others, while at the same time their own lives are a mess. I am always suspicious of really religious people. Let me give you a quick example.

During the past couple of years, the church has been passionately campaigning against gay marriage. The reason they continuously give is that they want to defend the sanctity of marriage. And yet, we have a divorce rate that is equal with our pagan society. We have Christian married men having affairs at the same rate as secular society, and as many internet affairs and addictions to pornography as the culture at large. So what does that all say about our view of the sanctity of marriage? We are nothing short of hypocrites.

That is just one example of hypocrisy in the church and how legalists approach life. Oftentimes they demand people live better than they themselves are living. For us, the message of the Gospel is this. The Gospel is for red and yellow, black and white. The Gospel is for rich and poor alike, educated and uneducated. The Gospel is for everybody.

I talk to many people who think they have to make themselves respectable before they can come to church to know Jesus. Where do they get these ideas? Is that the brand of Christianity we present to the world? The fact is that we are all unacceptable. The reason we come to Jesus is that He alone is the One Who can make us acceptable. Some of the people I invite to church say to me, "Pastor, if I came to church, the roof will cave in," to which I immediately respond, "I come to church every day, and the roof hasn't caved in yet. I'm sure it will be okay for you too."

Living and presenting an accurate Gospel message means that we never forget that we were unacceptable to God before we placed our faith in Christ. And the only reason we remain in a right relationship with God is not that we have become better people or somehow we have made ourselves more holy. We came to Christ by grace through faith, we remain in a right relationship with God by grace through faith, and we will make it to Heaven only by grace through faith.

Please, let's not look at unbelievers or people less fortunate than we are as if they have to earn their salvation or the right to be saved. They will be saved the same way we are, by grace through faith. We often expect people to live better than we do. If we preach the Gospel to ourselves every day, we will likely keep our message to others on track. And if we preach the Gospel to ourselves every day, we will likely not be bigots either. The point is this. The gospel crosses all ethnic, racial, social, and gender boundaries. Any confusion about that is a perversion of the gospel.

We must be careful not to turn anyone away because of race, social class, or appearances of any kind. We may be missing one of God's blessings. The following is a true story:

"A little girl stood near a small church from which she had been turned away because it was 'too crowded.'

'I can't go to Sunday School,' she sobbed to the pastor as he walked by.

Seeing her shabby, unkempt appearance, the pastor guessed the reason and, taking her by the hand, took her inside and found a place for her in the Sunday school class. The child was so happy that they found room for her, and she went to bed that night thinking of the children who have no place to worship Jesus.

Some two years later, this child lay dead in one of the poor tenement buildings. Her parents called for the kindhearted pastor who had befriended their daughter to handle the final arrangements.

As her poor little body was being moved, a worn and crumpled red purse was found which seemed to have been rummaged from some trash dump.

Inside was found 57 cents and a note, scribbled in childish handwriting, which read: 'This is to help build the church bigger so more children can go to Sunday School.'

For two years she had saved for this offering of love. When the pastor tearfully read that note, he knew instantly what he would do. Carrying this note and the cracked, red pocketbook to the pulpit, he told the story of her unselfish love and devotion. He challenged his deacons to get busy and raise enough money for the larger building.

A newspaper learned of the story and published it. It was read by a wealthy realtor who offered them a parcel of land worth many thousands of dollars. When told that the church could not pay so much, he offered to sell it to the little church for 57 cents.

Church members made large donations. Checks came from far and wide. Within five years the little girl's gift had increased to a quarter of a million dollars (a huge sum of money for the early 1900's). Her unselfish love had paid large dividends.

When you go to Philadelphia, look up Temple Baptist Church, with a seating capacity of 3,300. And be sure to visit Temple University, where thousands of students are educated. Also look up the Good Samaritan Hospital and at a Sunday School building, which houses hundreds of beautiful children, built so that no child in the area will ever need to be left outside during Sunday School time.

In one of the rooms of this building may be seen the picture of the sweet face of the little girl whose 57 cents, so sacrificially saved, made such remarkable history. Alongside of it is a portrait of her kind pastor, Dr. Russell H. Conwell, author of the book, Acre of Diamonds."

God works through all sorts of people. We must be careful to not turn away any of God's very special people or the special things He has prepared to do through them.