

Justified by Grace Through Faith

We're looking at the letter the apostle Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia - now modern day Turkey. And last Sunday, Colin told me that, apparently, the northern Galatians were originally Celts. And guess where the Celts originated from? Switzerland! And when their homelands were invaded, they spread outwards, including to Galatia. Which means that the Galatians were originally Swiss! Which might just explain why they thought salvation comes by obeying the rules!

But today's passage is a very human story - because it's about a failure on the part of the apostle Peter. And on the surface you might think why does Paul make such a big deal of who Peter does or does not go to the restaurant at lunch-time with? I mean, surely, there are better hills to die on than a mound of mashed potato? Or who you share a falafel with?

But, as we're going to see, this is an event that goes to the heart of how you see yourself, and others, and ultimately, God.

Reading: Galatians 2:11-21

The Final Judgement

If we're out on a walk as a family, and come across a church, often we'll go inside and take a look and, more often than not, the girls will check out the acoustics and start singing Amazing Grace or something. And if there's a graveyard, we might take a wander around looking at the headstones. Because, sometimes, what gets written is fascinating. I mean, how do you sum up a person's life in a sentence?

And I don't mean to depress you, but what sentence could someone reduce your life to? Or, at your funeral, what will people say about you?

I'm not trying to be morbid. But at the end of your life, there's inevitably going to be a weighing up of your life, isn't there. What do you think people will celebrate? Or be too polite to mention? And just like we all have this innate sense of justice, we also have this intuition that at the end we're going to have to give an account of ourselves. That our life will be weighed in the scales. Was it a life well lived?

And the Bible tells us where that intuition comes from - that it's not just you or others who will weigh up your life, but ultimately God will.

And maybe the most important question of life is, how do you pass that accounting? How do you stand before the Supreme Judge, and hear him say, 'that was a life well lived. You have my approval. I accept you'?

And the word Paul uses for that in v16-17, is to be 'justified'. And he's borrowed it from the law courts. And its opposite is 'to be condemned.' And you know what that means. You're staying in that courtroom, and you've been found guilty. But to be justified is to stand in that court room and be declared innocent, not guilty. No sentence to pay, no debt outstanding, no stain upon your character. And you can leave that courtroom a free man, head held high. Justified.

And that's what Galatians is about. How can you be justified before God and his court? How can you hear his word of approval over you, and be declared righteous, now, and at the end of your life: 'I accept you, I approve of you'?

What do you have to do to get that? Live a really moral life? Or a progressive, inclusive, non-judgmental life? Be true to yourself, or true to traditional values? Go to church religiously? Or embrace all religions? How does God declare you innocent?

The Path Not to Take

Now, this bust-up between Peter and Paul happens in Antioch, several hundred kilometres north of Jerusalem. And it was up in Antioch that Gentiles first started becoming Christians in large numbers. In fact, it was where Christians were first called Christians. Because, 'some of them are Jews, but some of them are gentiles, and they're all mixing together, so we can't call them Jews or gentiles, it's like they're a total new society, so let's call them Christians' - Christ followers.

And when Peter comes up from Jerusalem, to see what's going on, he happily mixes in with everyone else. Until, that is, v12, 'certain men came from James' - the leader of the church in Jerusalem. And these guys claim to be there on James' authority. And Paul calls them, 'the circumcision party' (v12), because we know from the book of Acts, that they were teaching: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). In other words, if you really want to be saved, if you really want to be justified, and counted righteous by God, yes you've got to believe in Jesus, but you've also got to become a Jew. You've got to do what Paul calls in v16, the 'works of the law.'

You've got to be circumcised, and obey the ten commandments, and try to love God with all your heart; and don't blaspheme, but do keep the Sabbath; and pray, and fast, and remember to eat only kosher food, and obey the clean/unclean rules... and then you'll be justified. Then you'll be counted righteous.

Now, those Old Testament rules on clean and unclean weren't just random. They were there for a reason. They were like repeated, daily object lessons for the people, that God was holy and they were not. And those laws taught them that you can't approach God without being cleansed.

And these men from Jerusalem were saying, 'yup, exactly, and to be justified, to be acceptable to God, you need to be cleansed, and you can only do that by obeying the law of Moses.'

But, if you think that, it's inevitably going to affect who you mix with, isn't it. Because you really don't want to mix with people who are *unclean*, because they might contaminate you. It's why Paul describes him and Peter in v15 as being 'Jews by birth and not *Gentile sinners*.' Because that's how you'll view anyone on the outside, isn't it. 'We're clean, we're acceptable, but they're 'sinners'.

And of course, in that culture, to eat with someone was the opposite of shunning someone. It was to accept them, and welcome them as a friend. And Peter had been happy to do that with these gentile Christians - because he knew, they're my brothers and sisters, they're clean, they're acceptable to God and they're acceptable to me.

And that's why Paul says in v15-16: 'We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law.' 'Peter, even you and me, who have all the

privileges of being Jews, know by personal experience that obeying the law can never make us right with God - because it's like a daily reminder of how wrong we are: failed again, try harder next time.' So the law itself tells us, we'll never find salvation this way: v19 'Through the law I died to the law.' And v16, 'by the works of the law no one will be justified.' Not Jew, not Gentile. The law can never declare you innocent - it can only declare you guilty. Because, hey! we might have some good days, but we also have plenty of bad ones.

So Paul is saying, 'Come on, Peter, you know that God didn't sit down and eat with us, and welcome us as his friends, because we were Jews and perfectly obeying the law - because we never can. So why do you think others need to do that to be acceptable to you?' Verse 14, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

But it's not just that living for the rules, to earn favour with God, fails, it's that it also leaves you only ever living for yourself. Look again at v19, 'For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.' And the implication of that is that when you think you've got to earn God's favour by what you do, even though superficially it looks like you're devoting your life to God, in reality you're living for yourself. You're serving, you're being obedient, but you're doing it for what you can get from God. Essentially, your life will be very self-centred.

But this isn't just a problem for traditional religion, like this circumcision party, is it? It's also a problem for progressive secularism. I saw in the news this week that a UK actor had got into trouble for talking about race. But it was the response of the Actors' union that caught my attention. In a series of tweets they called this actor, 'a disgrace to our industry' and called on other actors to 'unequivocally denounce him.' Which is the sort of thing that happened in Stalin's Russia. But the reason for their response is that, just like religion, progressive secularism also has a problem with self-righteousness. Of thinking one type of person is better than another. That you're clean and others aren't. That there are some people we associate with and others we denounce.

And in traditional morality or religion, it's the good, upstanding rule keeper who is saved and those who break the rules are lost. But in irreligious secularism, it's the progressive, the inclusive who are saved, and it's the traditional conservatives who are condemned and shunned.

And living for yourself isn't just a problem for the religious rule keeper, it's the virtual watch-word of progressive secularism. You've got to live for yourself!

And Paul is saying, that kind of thinking can never save you, it can never leave you standing innocent before God. It just makes you self-righteous, showing you how far short from God you fall.

But... there is an alternative!

Walking The Way of Grace

Look at v16, 'We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ.' In other words, we're not saved by what we do, but by putting our trust in what Jesus has done for us. That he lived the perfect life we fail to live, and that he died the death we deserve to die. And when we put our trust in him, and not in ourselves, God counts us righteous, innocent, not guilty, in him.

That's the gospel Paul says. It's justification by grace alone, through faith alone. It's God's gift to us in Jesus, that we simply have to receive.

Which means that in the gospel it's not the self-righteous morally upright or progressive who are saved and the rule breaker who is lost. It's the humble who are saved and the proud who are lost. It's those who know they can never be good enough, but instead put their trust in Jesus, who go home justified.

Now, maybe you think that's just some kind of legal fiction. Except, you think like this in multiple other areas of your life, don't you?

I mean, I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, but I read a report this week about the latest defeat suffered by Manchester United football club. And various supporters were saying stuff like, 'this is so embarrassing, we can't go on like this, this is shameful.' Now, why did the failure of 11 guys to kick a pig's bladder into a net bring shame and humiliation on thousands of people sitting in the stands? Because Man U's defeat was their defeat, Man U's humiliation was their humiliation.

But what if your team, or your political party, or the person you're backing wins? You live in the glow of that victory, don't you. Their victory is your victory. To take a Bible example, king David, when he was a boy, defeated the giant Goliath, and all Israel shouted in celebration. Why? Because he was their champion. His victory, was their victory, whereas Goliath's men fled.

And Christ is our champion. And his victory in life and death and resurrection is our victory. That when he died on the cross for our sins, we died and our penalty's paid. As Paul says in v20: 'I have been crucified with Christ.' And as we put our trust in him, his righteousness, his 'not guilty, I accept you' verdict before God is ours - because we're united with him, and all his goodness is counted to us. By faith, we're on Jesus' team. And the fact that he does it all, means we've got zero reason to boast in ourselves, which kills our self-righteousness - because we can never claim, I'm better than those 'sinners'.

That's how you're saved Paul says.

But here's the thing. Not only does that leave you secure, knowing that God accepts you now. It also totally changes the way you live.

You see, what was Paul's charge against Peter? Verse 13, 'The rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.' And Peter's behaving like a hypocrite because he knows that you're not made clean by observing the law. You're made acceptable to God by faith in Christ. And Peter knows that. I mean, he was there when Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. And it was Peter who had that vision of the sheet with all those unclean animals and a voice telling him - three times - to eat; just before gentiles came knocking on his door. So, of all people, Peter knows you're saved by grace through faith.

So why does he stumble here? Why does he fail on the integrity stakes? Why doesn't his behaviour match his beliefs? Well, Paul tells us, v12: 'He drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.' So Peter's afraid of this pressure group's bad opinion of him. And at that moment, the reward of their approval was more appealing than doing what was right.

In one of his lectures, CS Lewis talked about the desire for the Inner Ring. That desire to be counted among those who matter. To be accepted, to be *in* that group you admire. And Lewis says, “Unless you take measures to prevent it, this desire is going to be one of the chief motives of your life, from the first day on which you enter your profession until the day when you are too old to care. . . . Of all the passions, the passion for the Inner Ring is most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things.”

And, at this moment, Peter wants to be in the Inner Ring of these Jerusalemites. He wants their approval. He doesn't want to lose their good opinion of him. But it's not just Peter who struggles with this, is it? I mean, think how many times we make little, or not so little, compromises because we want to be *in*.

But look how Paul challenges him: v14, ‘When I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said. . . .’ So Paul doesn't see this as a cultural problem: ‘Peter, you really should be better mannered than to stop eating with them.’ He doesn't even see it principally as a moral problem: ‘Peter, you really shouldn't be racist like this.’ And so he doesn't tackle it by telling Peter ‘you've broken the rules of the community Peter.’ Paul gets that something deeper is going on.

I'm currently reading Marilynne Robinson's novel *Home*. And there's a character called Jack, whose father, now old, and frail, was the pastor of a small town. But Jack was the black sheep of the family. Alienated from the family and the town, but now he's returned home. And in a conversation with one of his sisters, he talks about his spiritual hunger, asking whether there's hope for a man like him. And, as he does, he talks wistfully about the fatherhood of God, before saying, “It is possible to know the great truths without feeling the truth of them. That's where the problem lies. In my case.”

But that's where the problem lay in Peter's case, and so often in ours too. You can know the great truth that you're accepted by God, you're justified, you're made clean by his grace, not by anything you do. . . . but we don't *feel* the truth of it. And so, like Peter, we don't walk in step with it, we don't live out of the goodness of it.

But when you do feel the truth of it, then the way you live and walk changes: v19, ‘so that I might live for God’ and not for myself. Verse 20, ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.’

You see, when you feel the truth that Christ loved you so much he gave himself for you, that desire for the Inner Ring and what other people think of you, loses its power. And when you feel the truth that the Son of God had to give himself to save you, you won't be self-righteous, or racist, towards others. Because deep down you'll feel, I'm a sinner just like them - a sinner saved by grace.

Walk out of step with the gospel and you'll look for acceptance and praise in all the wrong places. Feel the truth of the gospel and you'll know Christ loved you so much he died for you, and you'll walk in step with him, and you'll find him living his life through you - a life of moral courage not cowardice, a life of integrity not hypocrisy; a life of love and welcome, not racism; a humble life not a self-righteous life — and not to earn God's love but because you know, ‘I am already loved.’