

## **Stand firm in your gospel freedom Galatian 2:11-21**

*<sup>11</sup> But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly wrong. <sup>12</sup> For before some people came from James, he ate with the Gentiles. But when those people came, he drew back and separated himself, because he feared those from the circumcision group. <sup>13</sup> And the rest of the Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. <sup>14</sup> But when I saw that they were not acting according to the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of all of them, "If you, a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, why do you compel the Gentiles to live like the Jews?" <sup>15</sup> "We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners. <sup>16</sup> We know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. So we also believed in Christ Jesus that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. <sup>17</sup> But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves were also found to be sinners, then is Christ a servant of sin? Certainly not! <sup>18</sup> "In fact, if I build up again those things that I destroyed, I bring on myself the judgment of being a lawbreaker. <sup>19</sup> Indeed, through the law I died to the law that I might live for God. <sup>20</sup> I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I am now living in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. <sup>21</sup> I do not regard the grace of God as nothing. As a matter of fact, if righteousness is through the law, then Christ died for nothing!"*

This weekend we celebrate our independence as a nation. Parades, fireworks displays and gatherings will commemorate our 249 years as a nation since declaring its independence from British rule on July 4, 1776. Too often we take for granted the many freedoms we enjoy. As wonderful as it is to be citizens of this land of the free, it's important to remember we are citizens of a better kingdom, and eternal kingdom, a kingdom that offers even greater freedoms than the good old US of A. As citizens of the state and of God's church we enjoy numerous freedoms. In the Prayer of the Church that we will offer following the sermon and offering we'll highlight some of those freedoms and thank our God for every one of them.

We recall as we've been considering this letter in our last couple sermons how Paul wanted the Galatian believers to defend the freedom they had in Christ. As we mentioned before false teachers had threatened those churches by trying to hold them captive by God's law. Paul even mentions an occasion when a pillar of God's church endangered their freedom. But Paul would not let that happen. The freedom the gospel brought them in Christ dare never be taken away. Paul urges his first readers as well as us today to stand firm in your gospel freedom. We are to stand guard against faithless fear. We let God's grace move us.

The faithless fear that Paul mentions came from a prominent pillar in the church. Paul mentions a time when the apostle Peter came to Antioch. When one thinks of Peter during holy week, it's hard not to think of the three times Peter denied knowing our Lord. We can

see a similar thing happening in Antioch. Earlier Peter received a vision in which he learned an important point about God's New Testament church. In the vision Peter received he saw a gigantic sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. Contained in that sheet were all kinds of animals that were unclean according to Old Testament Jewish law. But then a voice told Peter, "Get up, kill and eat." But Peter objected: "I've never eaten anything impure or unclean. Then the voice said, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." When Peter was contemplating the point of this vision, it finally hit him. He said, "Now I really am beginning to understand that God does not show favoritism, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. So Peter shows up at Antioch and starts enjoying fellowship with the believers there including Gentiles believers. But then one day that all changed. It seems certain people showed up from Jerusalem who claimed to be sent by the Lord's half-brother James. Paul tells us, "*When those people came, he drew back and separated himself, because he feared those from the circumcision group.*" We know that James didn't encourage such separation. In the verses before our text we hear how James and other pillars gave Paul the right hand of fellowship and fully agreed with the Gospel Paul had preached.

But Peter saw them and got scared. He withdrew from Gentile believers. That was a denial of Christian liberty. He did this out of fear from those who insisted on circumcision and following God's Old Testament laws. Peter should have boldly confessed Christ before men, like he did at Pentecost, like he did before the Jewish Sanhedrin. But he lost courage and shamefully denied Christ, just like he had done some twenty years earlier on the night of our Lord's arrest.

But Paul would not stand for such action. In the presence of all he reprimanded Peter. What Peter did was sinful. As a pillar of the church was turning others off to the Gospel. Even Barnabas, Paul's friend and fellow missionary was deceived by Peter's actions. Peter should have been standing firm, assuring all of forgiveness in Christ and offering true freedom from sin, death and Satan that. But Peter's action was wrong. He caused division. He was declaring a message of bondage instead of freedom.

We still need to use God's law to point out sin in people. If people don't see their sin and need for a Savior, how can they appreciate the good news that a Savior has come. They must see how serious sin is and fear the punishment they deserve. But once that good news of a Savior who suffered sin's punishment for them, the Holy Spirit uses that good news to work saving faith in people's hearts. Then fear is replaced by freedom. Peter was hardly showing freedom when he withdrew from eating with Gentiles in Antioch. He did this out of fear. Christ has removed all fear. He endured a most fearful death suffering hell's punishment for everyone. Then he rose again and has removed all fear. He's even taken the fear out of death. He's made it a peaceful sleep. We can look forward to the

rest. We must be on guard against faithless fear. We must stand firm in our gospel freedom.

Stand firm instead in God's grace. People are never justified by works of the law. Sinful people simply do not and cannot do what the law demands. No one is justified except through faith in Christ Jesus who is holy God. The Holy Spirit through the gospel has put that faith in our hearts. That's something natural unbelief cannot comprehend. Natural unbelief always falls into lawlessness. The one who is not justified always keeps on sinning.

Faith knows that it has full forgiveness. It desires and is able to live a free life according to God's will. No law can accomplish this result. Through Christ I am free from the Law. Now the risen Christ lives in me. A Christian's life on earth guided by the Holy Spirit. The key element is faith. Faith shows itself in love. Both faith and love are free. They are the liberty and truth of the gospel.

Through the law Christ died for us by fulfilling it. Therefore we also died to the law with Christ. The law has no claim on us anymore. The law was torn down so I might live for God in holiness and righteousness. Sin showed up in my life when I tried to keep the law. That's why what Peter did in Antioch was so deadly. He was leading people to believe that you can be saved by the law. The law can only show us our sin and how much we need a Savior. Now that Savior has taken away my sin. Now God and his will are the goal and guiding principle in my life. So is Christ an agent of sin? Paul says anytime you imagine you must lend a helping hand by keeping the Law, you are making Christ a servant of sin. Then his merits do not abolish sin. They make a comfortable bed for sin. God forbid that.

I have been crucified with Christ and have died to the Law. If I have died, then I am no longer living. Christ lives in me then. Since the gospel has abolished the law, I no longer keep on sinning. I strive to live for God. That's what Christ does in us. Faith is now the guiding principle in my life. There I find forgiveness again and again when I am overcome by my flesh. It is the nature of faith to love the Lord who loved me and be on my guard against sin.

I do not reject the grace of God by trying to build up the law again. For if justification comes through law, then Christ has died in vain. Therefore, we want nothing to do with rebuilding the law. We simply live by faith through the gospel and enjoy the freedoms that Christ has won us.

Enjoy celebrating the freedoms you enjoy as citizens of this great country. But more importantly enjoy the freedom you have with Christ living in me. The life we live is by faith in the one who lived and died and lives again. Stand firm in that freedom. Stand guard against all fear. Let God's grace move you. Enjoy your freedom as a child of God.