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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## Holding On Unswervingly

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SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ JULY 18, 2021

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### Introduction to Scripture

In the New Testament, each of Paul's letters to the churches follows the same basic outline, with only slight variations. That order typically is:

- ◆ Greeting
- ◆ Prayer and Thanksgiving
- ◆ Special Contents/Body (usually the longest section)
- ◆ Personal Greetings

Since Paul's letters generally follow this pattern, deviations from it are telling. The book of Galatians opens in a significantly different way, which sets the tone for Paul's most impassioned letter. Following the greeting, Paul omits the prayer and thanksgiving and launches right into the issues at hand. What is especially telling is that in place of positive thanksgiving, Paul rebukes! There are no flowery words, just astonishment and concern, as though what is at stake in the letter is essential to the Gospel of Jesus—and indeed it is. Right away, when reading this letter, you get a sense of how critical this issue is for Paul. In verse 6, Paul abruptly fires, "I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who called you to himself through the loving mercy of Christ."

And if the beginning is telling, so is the ending. Though most of Paul's letters were scrawled by a scribe who was quickly capturing what Paul dictated, toward the end of this letter, Paul actually picks up the quill himself and the section he pens by his own hand is in all caps! So Galatians has an urgent message for the Christians of the first century, and God's Word is relevant to every generation, so this book is important for us today.

Our reading comes from Galatians 2, verses 11 through 21, where we get a wonderful understanding of Paul's concern for the Christian community by way of an illustration from an interaction that Paul has with Jesus's disciple Peter, who is now the leader of the Church in Jerusalem. Hear now the word of the Lord.

**B**ut when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong. <sup>12</sup>When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile believers, who were not circumcised [*and all the church was aghast*]. But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision. <sup>13</sup>As a result, other Jewish believers followed Peter's hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

<sup>14</sup>When I saw that they were not following the truth of the gospel message, I said to Peter in front of all the others, "Since you, a Jew by birth, have discarded the Jewish laws and are living like a Gentile, why are you now trying to make these Gentiles follow the Jewish traditions?"

<sup>15</sup>"You and I are Jews by birth, not 'sinners' like the Gentiles. <sup>16</sup>Yet we know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law."

<sup>17</sup>But suppose we seek to be made right with God through faith in Christ and then we are found guilty because we have abandoned the law. Would that mean Christ has led us into sin? Absolutely not! <sup>18</sup>Rather, I am a sinner if I rebuild the old system of law I already tore down. <sup>19</sup>For when I tried to keep the law, it condemned me. So I died to the law—I stopped trying to meet all its requirements—so that I might live for God. <sup>20</sup>My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. <sup>21</sup>I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if

keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die.

Galatians 2:11-21

### **Interpretation**

Galatians is one of the densest books in the New Testament. Each sentence seems to be twinkling like the walls of a diamond mine, so let's dig in a little.

First, just a quick observation. It's easier to be direct with family, isn't it? Your family can say things to you, sometimes even without words and just with a look, that get right to the point, but they would never dream of speaking in the same manner to someone outside the family. Lest we point the finger at others, let's be honest that the same opportunity is afforded to us as well. We can be and often are more direct with those we consider family. She probably would not say this, but if my wife were to say to me, "You're not wearing that," I would probably reply, "Ok, I'll go change." Despite the directness of the statement, I would hear her critique and change clothes. Now, if a complete stranger were to say that to me, I would be pretty offended and probably wouldn't hear it. But family can be direct.

My son David is the king of being direct. When David was about 4, I was snuggling with him on the couch while we were watching football. He had his blanket wrapped around him, his favorite corner furred in his hand, and his thumb in his mouth. Enjoying the moment, I said, "David, there is no place I'd rather be than right here with you now." He took his slobbery thumb out of his mouth, looked at me, and said, "I'd rather be outside playing." I took no offense, because he was just being honest. And you can be brutally honest with family. The closeness of the relationship and the security of the love allows us to speak more freely to each other and even when there is critique, we remain open.

It may be worth noting that Paul is writing this letter, direct as it is, to his Christian brothers and sisters in the family of faith. According to Paul, what happened in Christ changed everything, and undergirding this whole letter is his central conviction that because of Jesus Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, nor any other dividing mark of hostility in humanity. We are all one in the fami-

ly of faith in Jesus Christ. What was going on, then, in the Christian community undermined and threatened the truth of this new reality, as we will see. So, theologically, Paul is speaking to his spiritual family, which gives him the freedom to be very direct. And beyond the theological truth, the Galatian churches to which this letter was directed were communities Paul knew well. On each of his three missionary journeys, planting churches around the Mediterranean, he visited and spent time in Galatia. As a result, while Paul is much more gentle with those outside of the Christian faith, he can use more direct and impassioned language with his spiritual family. So if you bristled a little with the tone of this passage, this is insider, family language.

With that grounding, what's the issue that has Paul so worked up? The issue is that there are some who are suggesting that in order to be a follower of Jesus, one must first become a Jew. After all, the early Christians were all Jews. Jesus, himself, was a Jew. The original 12 disciples were Jewish. The Apostle Paul, who wrote Galatians, was a Pharisee, a Jewish leader. So that seemed to make sense. It was not until the Apostle Peter's conversion of a Roman centurion by the name of Cornelius that the first non-Jews became followers of Jesus. The implications of that moment, recounted in Acts 10, cannot be understated. For the first time, people outside of the Jewish faith, outside of the covenant law, were reconciled to God in Christ. What happened in Christ made the way for all people to have access to the family of God through faith in Jesus. For Paul, this is not a side aspect to the Gospel; rather, it is essential.

So by the time of the writing of Galatians, there were Jews and Gentiles in the family of faith. And as you know, when there is greater diversity in the body, there are often clashes of ideology. That's why dinner around the holidays is a little more stressful! Peter had had a dramatic conversion while in Joppa that convinced him to welcome Gentiles into the family of God. So when he visited with Paul in Antioch, he shared table fellowship with the Gentiles, which was considered somewhat taboo to the mindset of First-Century Jews. Still, Peter seemed to have adapted his thinking. However many, if not most, had not. It was so scandalous for a Jew to share a meal with a Gentile that when some friends of James, the brother of Jesus and a leader of the Jerusalem Church, visited and saw Peter eating with the Gentiles, they responded

with a large helping of criticism. Peter, who was incredibly bold in preaching the gospel even unto his own death, in a moment of weakness, surprisingly had a failure of nerve. Just like when he boldly asked Jesus to call to him to walk upon the water but then took his eyes off of Jesus, Peter takes his eyes off the prize for a moment. After the criticism he received for eating with Gentiles, he ceased sharing table fellowship with non-Jews. According to Paul in our passage today, his failure of nerve was because he was fearful of criticism.

No one likes criticism. For the one who receives it, it certainly is not pleasant. It is no wonder that Peter avoided it. Today, criticism is increasingly a part of the world we live in. Technology has made it easier for the transmission of ideas, so everyone seemingly has the ability to weigh in on matters and fire off criticism. People were quick to criticize politicians for their early handling of the pandemic. Interestingly, now that we have some separation from the initial onset of the pandemic, some politicians who were formerly criticized are actually being praised. I just returned from Illinois last weekend, which has not reopened as quickly as Florida has. Many family and friends in Illinois expressed not only a desire to be here but also admiration for how some of our leaders handled it. Still, I don't envy politicians because the whole political arena is plagued by constant criticism. If a politician takes a stand on anything, he or she will be blasted. But criticism is not found merely in the political arena. It is everywhere. A couple of weeks ago, in the aftermath of several crashes during the third stage of the Tour de France, riders decided to protest. Together, they paused for one minute at the start of the fourth stage to criticize the organizer of the race, the Amaury Sport Organization, for choosing routes that were too dangerous. Of course, several riders took to social media to lob criticism as well. Criticism is everywhere, and no one likes to be the target.

For the recipient of criticism, there are a couple of options. We can listen to it or ignore it. What we choose to do ought not to be based on how it makes us feel, but entirely dependent upon the validity of the criticism. If the criticism is valid, despite how hard it may be to hear, we can listen to the criticism and hear it constructively, humbling ourselves to learn from it. This is actually a wonderful way in which God has placed people in our lives to correct us and teach us. Though Paul has been rather

direct, this is the heart of Paul in sending this letter to the Galatians. He wants to encourage them to return to the essence of the gospel which they have set aside—a gospel that incorporates Jews and Gentiles. So if criticism is valid, it is wise to listen to it. Still there are those who refuse to listen to valid criticism. The Old Testament book of Proverbs is filled with examples of this. Proverbs summarizes it this way for us:

If you listen to constructive criticism,  
you will be at home among the wise.

<sup>32</sup>If you reject discipline, you only harm yourself;  
but if you listen to correction, you grow in understanding.

<sup>33</sup>Fear of the LORD teaches wisdom;  
humility precedes honor.

Proverbs 15:31-33 (NLT)

Humbling ourselves and listening is the way to receive valid criticism. By way of contrast, there are times when the criticism is not valid and if that is the case, choosing to listen to it can be disastrous and can even result in a failure of nerve. That's how Paul understands Peter's decision to refuse to eat with Gentiles. After receiving the invalid criticism—criticism that is contrary to what has happened in Christ—Peter stops sharing fellowship with Gentiles. For Paul, whose calling was to be the apostle to the Gentiles, this undermines the essence of the gospel. That's why this was so close to Paul's heart. The failure to share in table fellowship with Gentiles was a practice that drove a wedge in a community where Christ had torn down walls of hostility. It subtly communicated to others a distinction in the family of God which had been nullified by Christ. Paul was rightly concerned that it was going to spread. Even Barnabas, Paul's travel companion when they planted the churches in Galatia, ceased eating with Gentiles. Taking invalid criticism and changing course demonstrates a failure of nerve.

Although Peter received invalid criticism and compromised his principles, Paul refused to do so. Paul also set aside the dietary restrictions of the Law and shared meals with Gentiles. He even set aside the spiritual symbol of inclusion into the family of faith: circumcision. Just like Peter, Paul was criticized. First, his opponents suggested that he was lawless, which, for the Jews, stung more than a little bit. I mean, their central

book was called the Torah, which means the Law. Then, if that wasn't enough, his status as an apostle was also challenged. His opponents suggested that, because he didn't walk with Jesus for the three years of his public ministry, he was not really an apostle. Despite the criticism, Paul refused to listen, because he deemed it as invalid and untrue when held up against the standard and truth of God.

Here is why. Paul cares more about God's perspective than trying to win the approval of humanity. His critics called him lawless, which is to say that he didn't care about God's perspective, but that's not really accurate. He isn't lawless and never would be because he wouldn't take advantage of the grace of God in that way. Instead, he stopped placing his confidence in himself and his ability to gain God's approval through the law (which, candidly, none of us ever could), and humbled himself before God, trusting in the work of Christ. He is not saying that he is therefore throwing out the law. Rather, he says, here are his two options: either he eats with the Gentile "sinners" and becomes like the sinners, or he lives by the law and is condemned as a lawbreaker because of his inability to uphold it. That's why he says that when he tried to obey the law, it condemned him. What he means to say is this: We could never gain access to God through our own faithfulness. No human being could do that. We all sin and fall short. And thus we are condemned. So, Paul writes,

I died to the law—I stopped trying to meet all its requirements—so that I might live for God. <sup>20</sup>My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.

Galatians 2:19-20

The law reveals the standards of God and our inability to live up to God's standards, and, therefore, our dependence upon God. And now, through faith in Jesus, in His death, we too died to the power of sin revealed in the law, so that the new resurrection life might live in us. Therefore, we stand not as condemned, but as righteous in Christ. Based on the Word of God and the Work of Christ, Paul thereby rejects the criticism.

When faced with criticism, if it is valid, we must listen as though it is the correction of God. If it is invalid, we must reject it lest we have a fail-

ure of nerve in standing up for something that is essential to the gospel. It is only by holding it up to the gospel of Christ that we can determine its validity. The gospel is truth!

Our culture has sought to relativize truth, to suggest that what is true for me may not be true for you. While on the surface this may seem to have the effect of increasing tolerance of divergent ideas, candidly, I have not seen this in the world. Those who most staunchly hold to the idea of relative truth nonetheless seek to impose their so-called relative view of truth onto others as though it is objective truth. Consequently, I do not see more tolerance in our society. I see more criticism and anger and outrage. How about you?

Today, if you take a stand for anything, you are probably going to be blasted or canceled or marginalized. Candidly, I believe that it is inevitable that Christians will be the recipients of more and more criticism. Over the years, I have heard those outside the family of faith look into the family of faith and criticize it, saying, "You Christians just pick and choose what parts of the Bible you want to live by and what parts you don't." That's almost the same as calling Paul lawless for eating with Gentile sinners. "You Christians proclaim love as your central value, but you are unloving." That is like a child saying to a parent, "If you won't give me ice cream for every meal, you don't love me." "If you don't accept my idea or my lifestyle, you do not accept me." "You are anti-science." "You are intolerant." The criticism will come. And, as Pastor Su indicated last week, it probably will not come solely from those outside of the faith, but even from within.

The problem is that the way many of the criticisms of Christians are framed has made it especially challenging for young Christians to hold firm. I am a part of a Facebook group that has many "young" pastors from mainline denominations. First of all, that's a misnomer. We may have been young 15 years ago when the group was formed, but let's be honest: We are all middle-aged pastors now and calling it a young pastors group is becoming disingenuous. I was recently reading a quote from a progressive pastor in that group who said, "I can tell a lot about your sincerity of faith and your church by your stance on [hot button issue]." It does not matter tremendously what that issue was, but the



implication was clear: If you do not agree with my take on this world issue right now, you aren't a sincere Christian. Without much critical thinking, some will hear this criticism as Peter did, have a failure of nerve, and end up with a stance that, candidly, is unbiblical. Many Christians seek to distance themselves from the criticism so that they will not be considered part of the problem, because today, if you do not agree with the party line, you are labeled as unloving, unjust, enemies of progress. The framing of this makes it difficult to take a stand about anything.

Our role as Christians is to determine which criticisms are valid and which are not. If they are valid—that is, if they are true according to the Word of God—we must listen with open hearts for the correction of God. There are times when even those who are outside of the church can offer this criticism. When criticism is valid, according to the gospel, we humbly receive it. However, if the criticism is not valid, we must hold unwaveringly to the truth we have come to know. The only way to test the validity of the criticism is by holding it up to the light of the Word of God.

### **Our Response**

As Christians facing criticisms which are invalid, we can choose to be like Peter, who feared criticism and had a failure of nerve. Or we can choose to be like Paul, who received copious criticism, and yet who held so firmly to the gospel that he was willing to speak boldly about its implications. But we must choose who we are most interested in pleasing. So, who are you ultimately trying to please?

Still, we do so humbly, not setting aside the grace that we have received and being willing to associate with “sinners,” just as Jesus did.

To close, hear these words from Hebrews:

Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup>Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

Hebrews 10:22-23

