



This Sunday we were in Galatians 2v11-21, the final section of Paul's lengthy and autobiographical introduction to his letter. We began by noting that a confrontation like the one we find here can feel quite uncomfortable to awkward, non-confrontational Brits. However, with v14 we noticed that what was going on in this church was no mere clash of cultures, egos, or insubstantial things, it was an issue of the truth of the gospel.

1 – Peter's problem: he was living out of line with the gospel (v11-14)

The church in Antioch had blazed a trail in living out the extraordinary fellowship Jewish and Gentile believers could now enjoy together in Christ. However, with the arrival of some men from James (v12), Peter had begun to draw back from full table fellowship with Gentile believers, perhaps for the sake of fragile Jewish converts in Jerusalem, and the other believers had begun to do the same (v13).

What he was doing probably didn't seem like a very big deal to Peter, but Paul accused him of "not acting in line with the truth of the gospel" (v14). Paul said that Peter was not merely making the wrong call in a tricky wisdom situation, but was at risk of being on a different track from the gospel entirely. And not only was Peter making this grave error, but he was leading other Jewish believers to do the same (v13), and was surely leading Gentile believers to call into question whether they really were saved and to wonder whether they needed to take up Jewish customs if they wished to be accepted by Christ.

We, too, can slip into finding our assurance in keeping 'little rules', and by our actions, tone and body language if not our works, requiring other people to keep them too.

2 – Paul's challenge: carry on by faith in Christ (v15-21)

In his speech to Peter (v14-21) Paul explains what it is that they believe: that "a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Christ". The only way to be declared not guilty, Paul writes, is by putting one's faith in Christ. But from the tenses Paul uses in v16-17 we see that this justification has a present and a future dimension, as well as a past one. Where we might be tempted to think that we are saved by grace and continue in works, Paul emphasises that the past, present and future senses of justification all occur "by faith in Christ Jesus and not by the works of the law" (v16). Paul uses dramatic life and death imagery in the final verses (v19-20) to make the point that we have died to the law – to obedience as a way to pleasing God – and are now alive with, in and through Christ. We have started by faith, we must go on by faith. To return to works would be to make a mockery of Christ's crucifixion (v21).

We considered learning to say no, remembering that our gifts are gifts, and fixing our eyes on Christ who has done it all as ways we might, by the Spirit, learn to measure ourselves less by our 'little rules' and instead live in Christ's grace.

Here are a few questions you might want to use with your group...

1. Outline the situation. What had this church in Antioch previously been like? What had happened under Peter's watch, while Paul had been away?
2. Why do you think Peter had acted in the way he did? What pressure was he being put under? How might he have justified his actions?
3. Why did Paul take such issue with Peter's behaviour? Why did Paul feel that this was a gospel issue rather than a wisdom call?
4. We know that we have been saved by faith. In what ways can we, too, slip into trying to continue by works?
5. Why is it so important that, having been saved by faith, we continue by faith?
6. What 'little rules' do you see at work in your own life and in our church – ways in which we measure ourselves before God, and measure other Christians?
7. How can we help ourselves and each other not to measure our acceptance before God by our rule obedience, but to hold onto our faith in Christ?