

WALKING THE TALK
Galatians 2:1-6, 11-21

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Fred Craddock, famed professor of preaching, remembers a church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. During a period of explosive growth in that area decades ago, people were moving in from everywhere, even faster than houses could be constructed! Consequently, many lived in trailer homes and some even in tents. The members of a local church were afraid of so many newcomers—fearful that these newcomers would join the church, take over, and change the character of the church. Therefore, the members passed a resolution declaring that no one could belong to their church unless they owned property in the county. The newcomers had to go elsewhere. Over a period of time, the church gradually died. Now the church building is a restaurant, with barbecue as its featured item.

Years ago, Dr. Craddock and his wife were traveling through Oak Ridge when they decided to stop at this church-turned-eatery. In the parking lot were 18-wheelers and chopper motorcycles. The restaurant was filled with common folk. As the Craddocks enjoyed their delicious meal together, he commented to his wife, “Strange, isn’t it, these people have been made to feel more welcome in this place as a restaurant than they were when it was a church.”

As Paul continued his Galatian letter, he boldly rebuked a false gospel that excludes people. In chapter 2, Paul sustained his argument, asserting that both his call to be an apostle and the gospel he preached had not come from the Jerusalem leaders, but from his personal revelation from Christ. By the time Paul had his second meeting with the apostles at Jerusalem, fourteen years had elapsed since his conversion. At the conclusion of that meeting, there was no reproof from the apostles. On the contrary, they extended “the right hand of fellowship to Paul and Barnabas,” asking only that they remember the poor (2:9-10).

Walking the Talk With Open Minds (2:1-10)

Paul’s call in chapter 2 was for believers to walk the talk. While the Jerusalem apostles had not given Paul his gospel, they did receive his ministry to the Gentiles with an open mind. Paul realized that a cleavage between his Gentile mission and the Jerusalem church would be disastrous for the unity of the church. Although Paul’s efforts devoted to bringing Christ to the Gentiles could not have been invalidated by the Jerusalem apostles, his ministry certainly would have been frustrated if the Jerusalem leaders had refused to accept his gospel of grace.

Like spies or traitors who infiltrate the opposing camp, false brethren were pretending to be part of the Christian church. Instead of seeking the gospel’s progress, they were working to subject Gentile Christians to law-keeping, including circumcision. Paul was not willing, “even for a moment,” to place himself or Gentile believers back into the very bondage from which Jesus had released them.

Unlike the closed-minded false brethren, the Jerusalem apostles realized that Paul had been entrusted to preach the gospel to the uncircumcised, the Gentiles (2:7), much like they had been called to preach the gospel to the circumcised, the Jews (2:7). The same God who had worked through Peter in reaching the circumcised was also working through Paul to reach the uncircumcised (2:8). The Jerusalem apostles were walking the talk by exhibiting open minds. James, Peter, and John had pledged their friendship and support to Paul and Barnabas in their efforts to reach the Gentiles for Christ's Kingdom (2:9).

Walking the Talk With Open Arms (2:11-14)

If the Jerusalem apostles were going to walk the talk with open minds, they also needed to walk the talk with open arms. They needed to translate their decision to include the Gentiles into everyday action.

Peter fully understood that God had opened His Kingdom to the Gentiles. Peter, himself, had witnessed the conversion of Cornelius and his Gentile household when he preached the gospel in Caesarea (Acts 10). He had also opened his arms by sitting at the table with Gentile believers in Antioch.

The church in Antioch consisted of a majority of Gentile believers. Naturally, Peter shared complete fellowship with them, even crossing Jewish boundaries by sitting at the table and eating with Gentiles. As the "certain men from James" arrived on the scene, however, Peter began to retreat from eating with Gentiles due to peer pressure. He was caught in the crosscurrents—trying to live in both his Jewish world and in his Christian world. Peter was no longer walking the talk with open arms.

As believers, we must search our own lives to discover how our traditions are hindering our ability to live fully in the freedom that we have in Christ Jesus. I had a conversation with a lady whose daughter had left home to attend a Texas Baptist university. She had spent a lifetime teaching her daughter not to judge people based upon the color of their skin, carefully instructing her that God loves all people equally.

All seemed well until the mother realized her daughter was dating a student of another race. The mother revealed the tension she felt between her teaching of equality and her personal reservations about a future mixed marriage. When the situation hit home, she was reluctant to accept the full implications of her own instruction to her daughter.

Peter was caught in just such crosscurrents. He knew that God had accepted the Gentiles. He had seen God pour forth His Spirit upon Cornelius's family. Traditions, though, are hard to break and easy to return to—especially in the presence of peers. He was retreating from his "open arms" policy. If we are honest, we, too, can identify areas in our lives in which we say one thing but act contrary to the very thing that we "believe and teach."

Growing up in South Carolina, I was just the kind of child who could strike up a conversation with any adult about anything. Constantly, the grammar school teachers would write on my report card, "Howie talks too much in class." The next report card would read, "Howie continues to talk too much in class."

I was in one of those “strike up a conversation” moods when I noticed a group of men working in front of our house at 10 Dagenham Drive in Greenville. They seemed like the nicest guys. They worked and I talked, and I talked and they worked. They were paving the road as well as the driveway entrance to our house. After I had talked for about an hour, while they worked, I decided it was time for them to take a break. I invited all the guys to come on in the house—I was sure I could find them something to drink and something to eat. I went in to inform my mother that I had invited the really neat fellows working outside in for refreshments. They had done a marvelous job repairing the entrance to our driveway, and I felt like we should treat them to something special. After all, isn’t she the one who had taught me to be kind to everyone?

“You invited who to come in?” she asked. “You did what? Howie, that’s the chain-gang,” she said. “That’s a bunch of criminals, prisoners! They can’t come into our house to eat.”

Well, funny, now that she had mentioned it, it did seem strange that there were a couple of them with chains between their legs, and all of them were being carefully watched by a man in a uniform with a gun strapped to his side.

My “Hey, mom. Guess who’s coming for dinner?” wasn’t the high point of my mom’s day.

My mother is a kind lady, nonetheless, and so she allowed me to carry drinks out to them as they sweltered in the sun, working with hot black tar on that humid Carolina afternoon. They were appreciative, and I was happy to be able to treat them to a cold drink.

My mother informed me that next time I should ask her before I invite folk into our house. It seemed like an unnecessary policy, but one which I had to follow.

Perhaps as Christians we need to let our actions be as naïve as those of the elementary school child I was at that time. In many ways, we must reach out with open arms that complement the open minds we have received from the freedom of the gospel of Christ Jesus. Paul makes it clear that not only did he not receive his gospel or apostleship from the Jerusalem believers, but he was also willing to confront them concerning their hypocrisy when duty demanded it. Paul boldly told Peter that he was failing to live out his faith by not “walking straight” (literal translation of 2:14) according to the truth of the gospel. Even Barnabas, Paul’s missionary companion, was caught up in Peter’s hypocrisy.

Walking the Talk With Open Hearts (2:15-21)

As Paul continued his argument, he anticipated other objections to the gospel he preached. (See Lesson 1 for the contents of the gospel the apostles preached.) He had thus far proven that both his apostleship and his gospel were not received from the Jerusalem leaders, but he knew that his opponents had other objections to his ministry to the Gentiles. His opponents were saying that Paul, the Pharisee, was now advocating a gospel that promoted lawlessness disguised as grace. They were arguing like this:

Paul, your doctrine of having a right relationship with God through having faith in Christ, apart from the works of the law, is a very dangerous teaching. You’re going to produce a lot of so-called

members of God's Kingdom who have no sense of moral responsibility. Sin will be rampant. In fact, Paul, your gospel encourages people to sin so that grace will flow all the more from God's throne. We've never heard such words as you are advocating, even teaching people that they do not have to obey the laws of Moses. If God is going to justify bad people, then what reason have you given people to seek to be good? You're teaching the people to just live as they please!

Paul responded by arguing that Christians are made right with God through Jesus Christ's faithfulness to the cross and our belief in what He has accomplished for us. We are not saved through what the law can accomplish (works of the law). Verse 16a could be translated, "We are not justified by the works of the law but through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, even as we have believed in Christ Jesus." Rather than encouraging sin, Paul said that his gospel of God's grace which focuses on Christ's faithfulness, His willingness to die on the cross, actually demands a more exemplary lifestyle than even that required by the law. Christ is not a minister of sin and does nothing to further sin's interests.

Paul continued his argument by saying that he could not rebuild or take on once again Jewish tradition or Jewish laws because he was dead to the law that he might live to God (2:18-19). Something happened when Christ was faithful to His Father's will in dying for our sins. Believers have broken free from the old dominion and bondage of the law which actually trapped people into moral failure. Christ's crucifixion and resurrection allow us to live without the shackles of the law. Paul declared our participation with Christ (2:20). When He is crucified, we are crucified. As we die to our old selves, we are resurrected to the indwelling of Christ in the believer. Claiming the necessity of law-keeping demeans the crucifixion of Christ which has set us free from Jewish identity markers of circumcision, dietary restrictions, and Sabbath observance. As we grow in Christ, we do not make ourselves new, but we realize that we have been made new in Jesus Christ. We live out who we are as we respond in belief to God's act of grace on the cross.

After flying to Honolulu, Tony Campolo, a college professor, was unable to sleep. He ventured into an all-night diner where he overheard a group of prostitutes talking. One mentioned to her friends that the next day was her 39th birthday. Another replied scornfully, "What do you want? A birthday party?" She retreated into her defensive shell. "I've never had one in my whole life. Why should I expect one now?" It struck Campolo that it would be a good idea to conspire with the owner of the diner to throw her a surprise party the next night. A cake was baked and all was prepared. The cries of "Happy Birthday" from her small group of friends and a stranger left her stunned. She was shocked that anyone would go to this much trouble just for her. She asked if she could take the cake home and then left with her prize. As she left, Campolo offered to pray and prayed for her salvation, for her life to change, and for God to be good to her. The prayer startled the owner, who asked antagonistically, "You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" He responded that he belonged to a church that threw birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.

This story captures the contents of Galatians 2. First, we are made righteous, not by our own actions, but by the actions of Christ Jesus. Second, as we preach the gospel we are to reach out to all people, particularly those of different cultures or customs whom society rejects or marginalizes. Third, as we die with Christ, we are resurrected with Him to a new life, one that demands that we change our old ways and live in obedience to the teachings of Christ.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

Table-fellowship was a significant concern for the average Jew. To share table-fellowship meant to share fellowship with God. Remember the story of Daniel when he and his friends refused to partake of the royal table of a Gentile king because of their Jewish concerns (Daniel 1)? Remember what the Pharisees said about Jesus? They were offended because “this man receives sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2).

In Acts 11, after Peter had shared table-fellowship with Cornelius at Caesarea, the Jews were upset because, “you went to uncircumcised men and ate with them” (Acts 11:3). The “men from James,” likewise, were upset because Peter was freely sharing table-fellowship with Gentile believers in such a way that displayed his total disregard for the usual Christian practice in Jerusalem. Much was at stake when Peter decided to withdraw from openly eating with his Gentile brothers. He had given in to peer pressure and once again asserted the law over Gentile believers.

Walking the talk

- with open minds
- with open arms
- with open hearts

Who is different from you?

What barriers are you placing between them and the gospel?

And will we walk the talk every day?