

LIVING THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE

BY DR. JERRY VINES

By the Book™ A Chapter by
Chapter Bible Study Series
from Jerry Vines Ministries
2295 Towne Lake Parkway
Suite 116 #249
Woodstock, GA 30189

Let's Begin

There is much talk about "Gospel-centeredness" in many evangelical circles today. What does it mean to be "Gospel-centered"? Is there a difference between being "Gospel-centered" and being "Christ-centered"? One group says the core dynamic of Gospel-centered ministry is about worship and fervent prayer.

While some may have distinct impressions about what being "Gospel-centered" is, the Apostle Paul remains clear about the centrality of the Gospel and its impact in our lives. Hence, Galatians 2 remains a classic passage to frame precisely what a "Gospel-centered" life looks like.

As we begin our study of the Gospel-centered life, let's follow the outline below:

- I. **Maintaining the Truth of the Gospel (vv. 1-10)**
- II. **Living the Truth of the Gospel (vv. 11-21)**

I. Maintaining the Truth of the Gospel (vv. 1-10)

Early in the church's history, a convention was held (Acts 15). The issues surrounded the evangelistic vision of the early church as it moved across the Roman empire. Was Jesus the Savior of all men, or was He only Messiah to the Jewish people? It was the most significant question the expanding church faced. Even today, some still ask that question. Indeed some theologies teach Jesus did not die for everyone but only for "God's elect." The truth, of course, lies not in what theologies teach but in what the Word of God teaches. And, more significantly on this particular question, what the Lord Jesus Himself teaches, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son; that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

While we have Luke's report of the council that met at Jerusalem (Acts 15), Paul gives us a behind-the-scenes view, so to speak, in Galatians 2. First, he speaks of his *doctrinal presentation*. He writes, "Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also. And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain" (Gal. 2:1-2).

At the time, he was in Antioch. People were getting saved in great numbers. Whenever people respond positively to the Gospel, hell goes ballistic. The devil will throw the biggest wrench into the machine which is evangelistically successful. False teachers showed up and began to teach a message contradictory to the Gospel of grace through faith. Fallen human beings possess a natural tendency to seek after praise for their worthy efforts, especially when it comes to their relationship with God. Just as Adam & Eve thought they could "save themselves" by doing so apart from God, so our problem has been the same ever since (Gen. 3).

The false teachers were known as the "Judaizers," known simply as men "of the circumcision" (2:12). They proclaimed Jesus was the Jewish messiah and died for his countrymen. However, they added a "twist" which contradicted Paul's Gospel of grace. They also taught, in order to be saved, not only must one believe in Jesus, but also one must be circumcised according to the law of Moses (cp. 5:2, 3, 6, 11; 6:12, 13).

With righteous indignation, Paul was infuriated that teachers would load people down with the law Jesus fulfilled, thus turning the Gospel of grace into a false Gospel of works! Therefore, taking his companions in preaching, Barnabas and Titus, he set out for a meeting in Jerusalem to straighten out this horrible situation.



Once there, he spoke his doctrinal presentation *plainly*. He “communicated” the content of the Gospel he preached everywhere. He laid it out, point by point. The message he preached in ancient Greece was the message we continue to preach today. The Gospel is so simple a child can understand it and so profound philosophers are baffled by it. Paul also made his presentation *privately*. In other words, Paul probably met in a “pre-conference” meeting with the church leaders. Why? He had no intentions of travelling so far without making sure his trip was not wasted; or, as he put it, “lest he run in vain.” Had the church leaders rejected him, his ministry primarily to the Gentiles would have suffered greatly.

The leaders’ meeting was filled with recognized leaders in the church (v. 9). And, Paul treated them with both courtesy and respect. Also, his fears were unfounded, and as we shall see, the leadership supported him fully.

Second, Paul spoke of his *ceremonial confrontation*. He goes on to write, “But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that

*The Gospel of
grace through
faith was the
apex of God’s
revelation
concerning how
to be saved.*

the truth of the gospel might continue with you” (vv. 3-5). The main meeting began. The council was assembled. Peter undoubtedly told how he himself had preached the Gospel to the Gentiles though his main ministry was to the Jews (cp. vv. 7-8). Paul reported how he and Barnabas won souls all over Asia-Minor. Indeed he had one of his converts with him—Titus—who was the perfect “test case.” Titus was a Gentile, but never circumcised. What a testimony meeting they had! At times, I sense we are missing a special blessing when we do not have moments when Christians can “testify” to God’s grace at work in their lives. Many people have come to the Lord through the “testifying” of other believers.

The meeting was beyond doubt going very well when Paul slipped into the presentation a confrontational phrase—“false brethren” (v. 4). The false brethren forced themselves into the meeting “unawares.” Why? According to Paul, to “spy out” the liberty they had in Jesus Christ. The purpose of the false teachers was to make ceremonial slaves of the new believers, pushing them to adhere to the law of circumcision. In short, they told the new believers, “You’re not saved unless you receive circumcision according to Moses’ law.”

Nor would Paul back down. No, not for a moment! The Gospel of grace through faith was the apex of God’s revelation concerning how to be saved. If Paul buckled here, the Gospel would be forfeited completely. Some matters the church cannot ever concede to the cultural winds which continually blow against it. Dress or style does not keep someone from Jesus. But tell men or women they are saved by what they do and you are signing their ticket to hell. Paul would not budge. Neither can we. We are saved through grace alone by



Reflection Connection

Think for a moment what it would be like standing before leaders in your church rehearsing how God was working in your life and ministry. How would you proceed? Upon what would you focus? Would you fear being rejected?

faith alone because of Jesus Christ alone. It is either grace or works. It cannot be a combination of the two. Each cancels the other out. Paul's Gospel was a Gospel of grace.

Third, Paul spoke of his *personal vindication* (vv. 6-10). According to him, his message was vindicated, "But of these who seemed to be somewhat, (whatsoever they were, it maketh no matter to me: God accepteth no man's person:) for they who seemed to be somewhat in conference added nothing to me: But contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter" (vv. 6-7). God is not impressed with our position in the church. I am humbled God allowed me to pastor a church for many years with several thousand members. So what? You may be a deacon, or hold some official office in your church. So what? In God's Kingdom, there are no big-shots. We all stand on level ground when we stand before Jesus.

Also, Paul's *ministry* was vindicated (vv. 8-10). Paul preached the same Gospel, but to a different audience, an audience mostly made up of Gentiles. God calls different people to different places. He sends one to rural folks and another to city dwellers. He sends many to a foreign land, and many times those foreign lands require the preacher to learn a brand new language and culture. He has to "become as they are" without losing the Gospel message. The Holy Spirit empowers each person in every situation to accomplish the task the Lord has given to him or her.

Paul's ministry specifically to the Gentiles was vindicated in Jerusalem. Paul showed us what the Gospel-centered life is all about. The Gospel-centered life begins with a fundamental commitment to maintain the truth of the Gospel no matter the cost. Pressure did not affect him when it came to the Gospel of Jesus.

II. Living the Truth of the Gospel (vv. 11-21)

Paul moves us from maintaining the truth of the Gospel to living the truth of the Gospel. No matter how much the truth is defended, if it lacks living the truth, it lacks credibility. What we believe must be obeyed and applied to daily life. Truth applied affects the way we function, the way we think, and the way we decide.

First, note Peter's failure. Paul records, "But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also



was carried away with their dissimulation” (vv. 11-13). Paul records his tragic but necessary confrontation with Peter. He said he “withstood” him. The term is vivid and quite strong, meaning he “set his face against him.” Why? Paul is clear: Peter was “to be blamed.” What was Paul’s meaning?

First, he meant Peter was *inconsistent* (v. 12). Peter was comfortable, “eating with gentiles” in Antioch before any Jerusalem witnesses were around. However, when “certain came from James”, he immediately dropped out of sight of the Gentile believers. We must recall the background from Acts 10. Luke records God’s revelation to Peter that Gentiles, just as Jews, were loved by God and were just as savable as the Jews, through Jesus’ death on the Cross. If Gentiles had faith in Christ, Gentiles could be saved exactly as were believing Jews.

Peter appeared to receive the revelation well. Putting it into consistent practice, however proved challenging for him. But before we condemn Peter too harshly, remember both Peter and Paul were not perfect men any more than we are perfect today. Paul’s confrontation demonstrates this. Every believer must consciously make an effort to live out their daily faith. The Gospel-centered life maintains the truth of the Gospel, but it does more. The Gospel-centered life lives the truth of the Gospel!

Second, Paul meant Peter was *influential* (v. 13). And, his influence was hypocritical. Peter “dissembled”; that means out and out hypocrisy. Even more, his example was powerful enough to influence Barnabas, leading him “astray.” As the old saying goes, Peter talked the talk but he did not walk the walk.

Next, we note the *censure of Paul* (vv. 14-21). What was Peter exactly doing? He was, in essence, putting

pressure on Gentiles to behave as Jews. By eating with Jews at first, he was demonstrating both acceptance and grace. However, when he reversed himself, because the Judaizers showed up, he demonstrated just the opposite: *Gentiles are unworthy of our fellowship unless they become as Jews*. Paul’s censure of Peter shows clearly what salvation is, and what the Gospel-centered life is all about.

First, it is about the *meaning* of salvation (vv. 15-18). Of all people, Jews ought to know what it is to attempt to work his or her way into heaven (v. 15). Paul then records one of the most masterful statements in the word of God about how to be saved, “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified” (v. 16). Used three times in this verse, “justified” stands central to understanding salvation. It carries with it the idea of being “declared righteous.” How is one declared righteous before God? Hardly by the works of the law—including circumcision! Rather, only by faith in the Lord Jesus may any person be declared righteous in God’s sight.

*Every believer
must
consciously
make an effort
to live out their
daily faith.*



In Paul's language, righteousness is not an accomplishment we perform; righteousness is an act declared by God upon us. How? Because of what Christ did on the cross. Jesus paid our penalty for sin. Hence, as we place our faith in Christ, God pronounces us righteous conditioned on our faith in Christ. The Gospel is good news, great news for sinners such as we are!

In addition, if we attempt to be "justified" by our own merit—including the merit the Judaizers placed on circumcision—we abandon God's Divine plan of redemption and substitute our own (v. 17). No one attempting to be saved under these works-righteousness conditions will ever be saved.

Second, the Gospel-centered life is about the meaning of *sanctification* (vv. 19-21). Paul says those who live "unto God" are "dead to the law." Paul does not mean he was dead to moral living or obedience to God. Instead, he meant he no longer depended on the law for his salvation. He depended on grace. Christ fulfilled the law. Now he was a servant of Jesus Christ. Also, the law still serves a function. It shows us sin. But it has no power to save us from sin's consequences. Only Jesus can save us.

Finally, Paul reveals how the Christian lives his or her life, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (v. 20). When Jesus was nailed to the cross, we were, in God's providence, nailed there with Him. Some old writers used to speak of the "mystical union" with Christ. By that they had in mind this verse. Our old sinful lives died with Christ on the cross. In the resurrection, we rose with Him. Paul says elsewhere we are seated with Him in heavenly places in Christ (Eph. 2).

Through the indwelling Holy Spirit, Christ lives in us. He says, "nevertheless I live," and by that he means we are identified with Him in death and now in resurrection life. The Gospel-centered life is a life lived by the power of the Lord Jesus, identified with Him in both death and life. That He gave "himself for me" becomes the heart of the Christian journey. He makes the Gospel-centered life a reality.

Golden Greek Nugget

Paul makes clear that when he confronted Peter, the confrontation was loving but necessary, because "he was to be blamed." The term translated "blamed" is *kataginôskô*, a word which comes from two other Greek words, the first meaning "down" or "against" and the other word meaning "aware" or "certainty because of experience" Hence, Peter was, in essence, caught with his hand in the proverbial cookie jar. Paul knew this. So did Peter, for he never challenged Paul's judgment.

Wrap Up

In this study, we discovered the Gospel-centered life. The Gospel-centered life begins with maintaining the truth of the Gospel and continues with living the truth of the Gospel. It does not end, however, until Jesus comes for us in the rapture or we go to Him in death. May all of us seek to live the Gospel-centered life.