

SERIES: Free At Last!

SERMON: **No Infallible Leaders!**

SCRIPTURE: Galatians 2:11-14

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This morning I want us to begin our time together by reading our Scripture text for today—just four verses from Galatians 2:11-14:

*When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.*

*When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"*

I'm not entirely satisfied with my sermon title today. "No Infallible Leaders!" is OK, but Pastor Dan found a better one in an article on this passage in Bible Study Magazine. It was called, "Smack Down!" When I preached on this passage in a series on Great Church Fights three years ago, I used the title, "Heavyweight Bout of the First Century," the heavyweights being Peter and Paul. But actually the title I like best is this: "Not Even the First Pope Had the Right to Mess with the Gospel!" Now I didn't use that today because my sermon titles go on the sign out front and on the website, and I have no interest in being disrespectful to our Catholic friends. But that title really communicates best what this text is all about.

You know, of course, that I don't really think Peter was the first Pope; I don't even believe in the concept of apostolic succession upon which the Roman Catholic papacy is based. But it is true that Peter was viewed as a Super-Apostle in the early church. Paul even refers to him that way in 2 Corinthians 11 and 12, and right here in Galatians he includes Peter among the three apostles reputed to be "pillars of the church" (2:9). There is little question that Peter emerged after the resurrection of Christ as perhaps the most popular and revered of all the apostles.

And that is why this passage is so important in Paul's defense of the Gospel. He has already told us, "Don't Mess with the Message!" Then he told us, "Don't Mess with the Messenger!" Now today he is going to drive home the point even further by showing that not even a Super-Apostle, not even a pillar of the church, or, if you happen to be Catholic, not even the First Pope, has the right to mess with the Gospel!

Now I want to read this same text from Galatians 2, this time from *The Message*, with a few minor edits introduced by me, but I'll let you sit, because this is a paraphrase, and I don't want to confuse it with the actual Word of God.

*Later, when Peter came to Antioch, I had a face-to-face confrontation with him because he was clearly out of line. Here's the situation. Earlier, before certain legalists came as representatives from the Apostle James, Peter regularly ate with the non-Jews.*

*But when that conservative group came from Jerusalem, he cautiously pulled back and put as much distance as he could manage between himself and his non-Jewish friends. That's how fearful he was of the conservative Jewish clique that's been pushing the old system of circumcision. Unfortunately, the rest of the Jews in the Antioch church joined Peter in his hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was swept along in the charade.*

*But when I saw that they were not maintaining a steady, straight course according to the truth of the Gospel, I spoke up to Peter in front of them all: "If you, a Jew, live like a non-Jew when you're not being observed by the watchdogs from Jerusalem, what right do you have to require non-Jews to conform to Jewish customs just to make a favorable impression on your old Jerusalem cronies?"*

It's important for us to pay close attention to the context of this passage. There are three sections to the book of Galatians. Chapters 1 & 2 deal with TRUTH, chapters 3 & 4 with SALVATION, and 5 & 6 with LIFESTYLE. We are still in the section on TRUTH and the question we are dealing with is, "Where do we find authority in religious faith?" The answer Paul has given is that we find it in the apostolic faith once delivered to the saints. We find it in the unadulterated Gospel, the good news that Christ died for our sins. This Gospel of grace is the only good news there is; any other gospel is bad news, and whoever propagates another gospel is subject to hell-fire.

Then Paul turned his attention to the defense of his apostleship. He had to do that because the false teachers who had infiltrated the churches he had planted, were undermining his Gospel by undermining his credibility. Paul defended himself by demonstrating that he didn't get his Gospel from anyone but God Himself. But when he finally submitted his Gospel of Grace to the Apostles in Jerusalem, and they had no objection to his message. In fact, they extended the right hand of fellowship and sent him on his way to share the Gospel with the Gentile world.

But Paul has one more weapon in his arsenal against the false teachers who have honed in on his churches and tried to propagate their gospel of works. He tells them about an encounter he once had with Peter. Now please understand that Peter was the patron saint of the legalists in the church. They tended to view him, mistakenly I think, as the quintessential conservative, the traditionalist who could be counted on to maintain the status quo. After all, Peter knew Jesus personally; Peter had walked with Him for 3 ½ years. Peter was at the trial of Jesus, at the crucifixion and at the resurrection, and while he messed up big-time during the trial of Jesus, Christ forgave him and gave him the keys to the kingdom.

In the years since Christ's resurrection, Peter had spent the bulk of his time trying to reach Jews with the Gospel. In doing so he found it very useful to continue to attend synagogue regularly, encourage circumcision, and generally keep the laws and customs of the Jewish people. And mind you, there was nothing wrong with that. Even Paul accepted the important evangelistic principle of "when in Rome, do as the Romans do," though he expressed it a little more carefully. In 1 Cor. 9:20ff he wrote, "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews . . . To those not

having the law, I became like one not having the law . . . I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.” It was fine for Peter to keep Jewish customs, so long as he understood that these things had *nothing* to do with salvation.

But the false teachers in Galatia seemed to pay attention only to what Peter did, without asking why he did it, and therefore they wrongly interpreted his behavior to mean that he sided with them in this battle between Law and Gospel. Unfortunately Peter played right into their hands in the incident we read about in Galatians 2, for though he actually agreed intellectually and theologically with Paul’s Gospel of grace, he denied the Gospel of grace by his lifestyle, i.e. he was a blatant hypocrite when he went to Antioch. Paul had to rebuke him to his face for what amounted to an intolerable distortion of the Gospel

The principal point we need to glean is that ecclesiastical leaders, no matter how high their status in the church, are not infallible, and they do not have the right to mess with the Gospel. The Gospel is the Gospel even if the most important leader in the church denies it or fudges on it.

Now please understand, that when I say there are “No Infallible Leaders,” I am not denying that the Scriptures themselves are infallible. I believe the Apostles, including Peter, were inspired when they were writing Scripture, and thus their writings were infallible, but apart from that they were perfectly capable of making errors and misjudgments, just like the rest of us. And Peter made a huge one.

It wasn’t that he didn’t know better.

### **Peter was introduced to the Gospel of Grace by Jesus Himself.**

In His mentoring of the Twelve disciples, Jesus clearly taught that racism and classism and sexism are all antithetical to the Gospel. He communicated this primarily by example as He spent the bulk of His own time ministering to those whom Peter, as a Jewish person, was brought up to think of as outcasts and hopeless—Gentiles, women, lepers, tax gatherers, the poor, the demon-possessed, and so forth. These people certainly were not spiritual achievers in Peter’s view, but Jesus reached out to them anyway and accepted them on the basis of their faith. There was, for example, a Gentile centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus offered to go and heal him, but the man replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word and my servant will be healed.” When Jesus heard this, He was astonished and said, “I have not found *anyone in Israel* with such great faith.” (Matthew 8:5-13)

On another occasion a Canaanite woman asked Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter. The disciples, including Peter, urged Jesus to send her away because she was irritating them. Jesus Himself then said something startling to her, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.” Clearly He was referring to the Jewish people as children and the Canaanites as dogs. But the woman was undeterred. “Yes, Lord,” she said, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great faith! Your

request is granted.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour. (Matthew 15:21-28).

Peter was a slow learner, but eventually he came to realize that the good news that salvation was available to all who believed and only to those who believed. But he still had a ways to go. It was one thing to admit that Gentiles could be saved. It was quite another to treat them as brothers in Christ.<sup>i</sup>

Because of Peter’s deep-seated prejudice toward Gentiles, God decided to confront him in a profound way with the Gospel of grace.

### **Peter was profoundly confronted with the Gospel of grace through an amazing experience with the centurion Cornelius. (Acts 10)**

The story is recorded for us in Acts 10, and while I’m sure many of you are familiar with it, let me retell it briefly. About noon one day Peter went up to the roof of his house to pray. He fell into a trance, and saw heaven open and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. In that sheet were all kinds of unclean animals (that doesn’t mean dirty animals but non-kosher animals). A voice from heaven told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill these animals and eat them.” He responded, “Surely not, Lord. I’ve never eaten anything that wasn’t kosher in my whole life.” The voice reprimanded him, “Don’t call anything unclean that God has made clean.”

This happened three times (I guess Peter was a slow learner). Then suddenly the sheet went back up into heaven. Not surprisingly Peter was baffled about the meaning of all this, but then at that very moment three men knocked on his door. They were a delegation from Caesarea, sent by a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Regiment. Cornelius was a devout, God-fearing man, generous and given to prayer, but he wasn’t a Christian yet. He too had experienced a vision which told him to send servants to Joppa to find a man named Peter and bring him back to Caesarea. When the delegation arrived at Peter’s door, the Holy Spirit told Peter it was OK, and so he invited these Gentiles into his house as his guests, without a doubt the first time in his life he had entertained unclean Gentile guests in his home.

Two days later Peter was in Caesarea being entertained in the home of Cornelius, without a doubt the first time in his life he was a guest in a Gentile home. Listen to what Peter said to the large gathering of friends Cornelius brought to his home to meet Peter and to hear the Gospel: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So what I was sent for, I came without raising any objection<sup>ii</sup>” (Acts 10:28-29).

What an amazing act of courage for Peter! And what an amazing result! Cornelius and all his friends were converted, filled with the Holy Spirit, and even baptized into the Church—all because Peter was willing to change his entire cultural orientation in favor of a truly biblical view of the fact that the ground is level at the foot of the Cross.

Now if only he had adhered to what Jesus originally taught him and what God subsequently drove home through Cornelius, this incident Paul tells us about in Galatians 2 would never have happened.

**But Peter compromises the Gospel of grace when pressured by a group of legalists from Jerusalem. (Gal. 2:11-14)**

The location of the event Paul records in Galatians 2 is the city of Antioch in Syria, where Paul and Barnabas had been doing evangelistic work for several years. This is where the disciples were first called Christians. Peter, too, came to Antioch for ministry. When he first arrived in Antioch he stayed in the homes of Gentile Christians, eating with them, worshiping with them, and treating them as his brothers and sisters in Christ, just as he did with Cornelius and his friends.. UNTIL, that is, a delegation arrived in Antioch from Jerusalem.

Galatians 2:12 tells us that “certain men came from James.” I suppose this was a group of Jewish Christian leaders from Jerusalem who came to Antioch to see how things were going or perhaps to take part in a missions conference. We don't know for sure why they came, but we do know for sure that they were conservative and legalistic. The reason the church in Jerusalem was conservative is that it was racially almost entirely of Jewish background. To reach other Jews they tried to avoid any unnecessary offence to Jewish people. Therefore they kept the Mosaic Law and followed Jewish customs and culture as much as possible.

That was not the problem. The problem arose when they demanded that Gentile Christians living in totally different circumstances also keep Jewish laws and customs. Let's suppose an American missionary decides to abstain from alcohol. Not a problem, probably wise. But he goes on a mission to Germany, plants a church, and demands that all new converts abstain from drinking beer if they want to be a baptized member of the church. He has made a non-essential into an essential of the faith. He has confused lifestyle with the Gospel. That's what Peter has done.

But why has he done this? Verse 12 tells us that the legalists from Jerusalem stirred up fear in Peter's heart and produced a very unfortunate change in his behavior. Proverbs 29:25 says, “The fear of man brings a snare.” Peter developed a fear of man. Why was he afraid? Well, if this delegation from Jerusalem saw him eating with Gentiles he might not be invited to speak at the next Annual Apostles Bible Conference in Jerusalem. The honoraria he counted on to support his family might dry up. His book and video sales might fall off. I don't know, but for some reason he feared the legalists and yielded to their pressure.

You know, of course, that this is not the first time the fear of man got to Peter. During the trial of Jesus he was identified as one of Jesus' disciples, and with an oath he denied it three times. He didn't abandon his beliefs about Jesus—he simply lacked the courage to stand up for them. The same is true here in Antioch. Please note that Paul doesn't accuse Peter of heresy so much as hypocrisy, which is feigning to believe what one does not believe. Ralph Keiper, a veteran Bible teacher from Denver, paraphrases Peter's mistake graphically:

*“Peter, I smell ham on your breath. You forgot your certs. There was a time when you wouldn't eat ham because you thought it would keep you out of heaven. Then after you understood God's grace in Christ it didn't matter if you ate ham. But now when the no-ham eaters have come from Jerusalem you have gone back to your kosher ways. But the smell of ham lingers on your breath. You are most inconsistent.”*

Friends, this whole scene highlights that there are two ways to undermine the Gospel of Grace. One is through heresy—teaching something that is incompatible with the Gospel, like the false teachers in Galatia were doing. The other way is through our lifestyle—to live in such a way that we deny the truth of the Gospel. But hypocrisy can be as dangerous as heresy, as we can see in verse 13.

### **Peter's hypocrisy on the Gospel of grace has a ripple effect upon other believers. (2:13)**

No man is an island. Especially is that true of those in leadership. Up until this time the Jewish Christians in Antioch had been quite content to worship and fellowship in unity with their Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ. But when a man of Peter's stature sets an example of discrimination, the rest of the Jewish Christians follow suit. Paul goes on to say (I believe with a good deal of inward pain) that the negative results were so far-reaching that “*even Barnabas was led astray*” (verse 13). Barnabas was Paul's closest companion. Barnabas was the one who had recruited him to come to Antioch in the first place. Barnabas was the encourager, the one known to come alongside a hurting person and lift him up. However, even Barnabas was influenced to follow Peter's example of discrimination.<sup>iii</sup>

But why did Paul make a public scene of this conflict(verse 14)? Surely, Peter was wrong, we've already seen that. But we don't call people down publicly every time they commit a little mistake, at least not if we are interested in the unity of the Church. The problem is that this was not just a little mistake.

### **Paul has to publicly challenge Peter because the stakes are extremely high. (2:14)**

In fact, the Gospel itself is at stake. Notice how verse 14 puts it: “I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the Gospel.” Well, how can eating or not eating with certain groups amount to a distortion of the Gospel? The last part of verse 14 makes it clear that the Gentiles were interpreting Peter's withdrawal from them as a clear signal that if they desired to be accepted as true brothers and sisters in Christ then they had to first obey Jewish laws and customs. In fact, they were feeling compelled to become Jews before they could become Christians, to go by Mt. Sinai on the way to Mt. Calvary! And that is heresy! Just as is anything we add to the simplicity of the Gospel.

Paul had to challenge Peter because no one else was willing to. No one else had the guts to stand up to someone as important as the Apostle Peter and tell him he was a hypocrite or challenge the theology behind his hypocrisy. It takes a mighty courageous and discerning person to do such a

thing. And we still need people in the church today who are willing to stand up to their pastor, their favorite radio preacher, to Billy Graham, or anyone else and tell them when their theology is wrong or when they are being hypocritical or when they have sinned. This one solitary act of courage on the part of Paul probably changed the entire course of church history.<sup>iv</sup>

The best way to confront another believer, by the way, is face to face. Verse 11 reads, “I opposed him to his face.” Oh, but there are easier ways to confront—like mentioning the matter as a public prayer request, or giving the person the cold shoulder, or firing off an anonymous letter. But none of these are nearly as effective or godly as Paul’s. He opposed Peter to his face.

But not only did Paul oppose Peter to his face, but he also rebuked him in the presence of all. I think that is rarely necessary, and Paul isn’t advocating it for every confrontation. But Peter’s hypocrisy was public and therefore the rebuke, to benefit the church, had to be public. I think the principle to be observed here is this: a rebuke should go as far but no farther than the sin which is being rebuked. Public sins should be rebuked publicly; private ones privately.

We didn’t read verses 15 and 16 earlier, so let’s read them now. They contain, I believe, Paul’s theological justification for his smack down of the Apostle Peter. Allow me to read it from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, with some minor revisions of my own:

*We Jews know that we have no advantage of birth over “non-Jewish pagans.” We know very well that we are not set right with God by rule keeping but only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. How do we know that? We tried it—and we had the best system of rules the world has ever seen! But our experience convinced us that no human being can please God by self-improvement, so we turned in faith to Jesus so that we might be set right before God by trusting in the Messiah rather than by trying to be good.*

*“We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”*

### **Paul proclaims the Gospel of grace without compromise. (15-16)**

This happens to be one of the most important passages in the Bible on the subject of justification by faith, but I’m going to save that discussion for next week. What I want you to see this morning is the absolutely clear assertion by the Apostle Paul that salvation is by grace through faith, not through keeping the law. In fact, three times in one verse he tells us that we cannot be justified (acquitted, saved) through keeping the law. Look at the beginning of verse 16: “a man is not justified by observing the law,” then a little later, “not by observing the law,” and then at the end, “by observing the law no one will be justified.”

But thankfully he doesn’t just tell us how one is *not* saved; he also tells us three times in the same verse how we *can* be saved—“by faith in Jesus Christ,” “faith in Jesus Christ,” and “by faith in Christ.” How could the core of our salvation be stated any more clearly—we are saved by

believing, not by achieving.

**Postscript: Peter accepts Paul's rebuke and changes his ways. (2 Peter 3:14-16)**

How do I know this? Well, we see it in the life of Peter as revealed in the Book of Acts and in the two NT books he wrote. We can see it particularly in the Council of Jerusalem, which occurred shortly after this confrontation in Antioch. Listen to Acts 15:6-11: Some legalists in the church had just made the assertion that "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses." Then verse 6 says,

*The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."*

Peter had learned his lesson. In fact, years after this incident in Gal. 2:11-14 the Apostle Peter wrote the book we know as 2 Peter. In the third chapter he wrote a touching tribute to the man who confronted him so boldly in Antioch.

*Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. 2 Peter 3:15-16.*

Here he acknowledges Paul as a deeper scholar than himself, but, more importantly, calls him a "beloved brother." Having been smacked down by Paul, he got up on his feet again, as a winner, and the Church of Jesus Christ became a winner as well.

**Conclusion:** Friends, my conclusion this morning is very brief and to the point. The Gospel of Grace is worth fighting for. After all, Jesus deemed it worth dying for. Bow with me in prayer as we prepare ourselves to celebrate the Lord's Table.

**Prayer:** Father, thank you for the honesty of Scripture in revealing the failures of its greatest heroes. We rejoice not in the fact that Peter fudged on the Gospel but in the fact that he repented, learned his lesson, and stood strong on the essentials, even to the point of becoming a martyr for his faith.

Thank you most of all for the Gospel, that wonderful, liberating truth that Jesus died for our sins. Thank you Lord that we are saved by believing, not by achieving, for if it were the other way around, the brightest and the among us could be saved, but the rest of us would be hopeless. But

because the ground is level at the foot of the Cross, every one of us can come and be cleansed.

Amen.

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i. A clear parallel might be drawn to many American white churches in our nation's past, particularly in the deep South. Almost no one in these churches denied that black people could be saved, but many refused to treat them as equal brothers and sisters in Christ. Nor were they welcome in white churches. I clearly remember a black couple coming to the Bible church we attended in Dallas in 1967. Several people got up and moved when they sat down. That was fairly normal in evangelical churches in the south, and that was just a little over forty years ago!

ii. Well, not exactly without any objection (if you read Acts 10:14 you see that Peter objected plenty when he first heard the voice from heaven). But he recovered his senses quickly and submitted to the divine will.

iii. I would suppose that Barnabas' personality had something to do with his action here, which might help to explain, though not excuse him. He was an encourager, a man with a very loving nature, and no doubt he hated to disappoint his friends. But a love that is not strengthened by the steel of theological conviction can be wishy-washy. One of the most important lessons we learn from the book of Galatians is that our commitment to truth can never be merely intellectual. It must be heart-felt and genuine. Otherwise we can do more harm than good to the cause of Christ.

iv. One of the key couples who helped us plant the church in St. Louis came to the church just about a month after we arrived there. They came from another church where they had found Christ and where they had grown considerably. But something happened at that church that caused this couple, young as they were in the faith, to put down a marker and say, "We can't allow that." The pastor had appointed a man as an Elder who didn't believe in the deity of Christ. When they learned this they went to the pastor and said, "How can a man be an Elder if he doesn't believe in the deity of Christ?" The pastor said, "Trust me. I think he'll come around over time; he's got great leadership potential and we don't want to lose him." This couple determined they couldn't follow that kind of spiritual leadership, left that church, and became key leaders in ours.