

Sermon by Chris Moroney at the 6pm Healing Service at St Andrew's Cathedral
Sydney

Wed July 12 2006

Reading Galatians 2:15-21 Topic: "Justification"

1 Special meals

I know that Christmas is a long way away. But I want us to think for a moment about Christmas lunch. Who do you normally have at lunch on Christmas day. Usually it would be your family and close friends. To be a member of a family and be left out of Christmas lunch would mean a serious breach of relationship. Sadly there are some families and some friendships that are so fractured that they will not be together for a meal, even on Christmas Day.

It seems to be the culture that we have inherited. Christmas Day is a religious occasion. It is all about peace and love and the family. Everyone does their best to be in Sydney for the day. And then on Boxing Day everyone does their best to get away, to get out of Sydney for the holidays. So Christmas becomes a time for celebrating the most important aspect of life, which is the family. Who you eat with at this special time is an indication of how you are getting on with people. If you do not have family around, do you have friends with whom you gather? If you are a family, how open are you to inviting friends in to share lunch with your family? How open are you to sharing your lunch, your special lunch and your special time with people who you may not know terribly well, but you know are lonely?

2 Hospitality

The extent to which we are willing to share a meal with people at any time says a lot about how we feel towards people. The whole idea of hospitality is a Christian expression of reaching out in love to other people. In Greek the word for hospitality means "loving strangers." This is important when we are meeting and greeting one another for the first time and getting to know one another, as Christians. It is a very important way to "Love one another" as Jesus commanded his disciples.

I hope that it has been your experience that you have joined a new church and been invited to someone's home for supper or for a meal. It is a wonderful way of showing love and acceptance. I know that when I have been invited to people's homes for a meal it has been a great time of getting to know people and share our Christian journeys together.

Can you imagine what it would be like if I was to accept an invitation to someone's house and enjoy their hospitality for a few weeks, and then all of a sudden tell my gracious hosts that I could not come over any more? I might start making excuses about being too busy at the moment, and then tell them I am not able to share in table fellowship with them any more. You would want to know why, wouldn't you?

I need to say that there may be good reasons for doing it, and there may be bad reasons for doing it. In every culture eating together is very significant. Withdrawing table fellowship sends a very loud and clear message.

When we come to look at Galatians 2:15-21 we find that Peter the apostle is in that very situation.

3 False Gospel

Let me remind you of the situation in the Galatian churches. This is the area of modern Turkey. Paul had taken the good news of the gospel there and a number of people had become committed Christians. After he left some other Jewish religious leaders came along. We can't be absolutely sure, but we have the impression that they had accepted that Jesus was the Messiah and that people should follow him, and keep all the Jewish laws – the food laws, the ceremonial law, circumcision, Sabbath keeping and so on.

Paul says in this letter that these are false teachers who are leading people astray. Galatians 1:6-9 (ESV) I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— [7] not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. [8] But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. [9] As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Into this situation comes another apostle named Peter. You may remember that Peter was one of the 12 disciples who spent three years with Jesus. He was a strict Jew, but he had been thoroughly converted to faith in Jesus as the Christ. Peter was there on the day of Pentecost when the gospel was first preached by Peter himself and the Holy Spirit came upon them in a remarkable way. The Holy spirit made Peter and the apostles bold to preach the gospel to the large crowd. Three thousand people came to Christ that day.

Later in the Acts of the Apostles we read that Peter was having an afternoon nap when he had a vision about food.

Acts 10:15-16 (ESV) And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." [16] This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

Acts 10:34-35 (ESV) So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, [35] but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

So Peter had been given a very clear understanding that things were different now because of the coming of the Lord Jesus. The Old Covenant had been replaced with the New Covenant. The food laws, the ceremonial laws no longer applied, to the Jewish Christians or to the Gentile Christians.

In the city of Antioch then, when Peter had come along and begun to mix with the Gentiles who had become Christians he was more than happy to share meals with them. They extended hospitality and he enjoyed their fellowship in the Lord Jesus. He had no personal qualms about spending time with them. He was not ashamed to be seen with them. He was happy to express that idea of Ephesians 2 that the dividing wall of hostility had been broken down through Jesus Christ....Until the false teachers came up from Jerusalem.

They are the people we might call the Judaisers, or the circumcision party. They wanted to have Jesus plus the Old Testament laws. They were true blue Jews and the wanted to be true blue Christian Jews and make everyone else keep all the Jewish laws as well as put their faith in Jesus.

4 Peter's Mistake

See how Paul describes this in Galatians 2:11-13

Galatians 2:11-13 (ESV) But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. [12] For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. [13] And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. That is very strong language and really shows the depth of Paul's feelings about this issue of the gospel. What is at stake? A correct understanding of the gospel. Therefore a correct confidence in a person's standing before God!

5 Paul's Rebuke

What did Paul do about it Galatians 2:14 (ESV)

But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

I want us to see that when Paul talks about "We ourselves" and "we know" and so on, that he is talking not just in general terms, but especially in terms that include Peter and the other Jews who have become Christians.

That is the best way to make sense of Paul's argument in Galatians 2:15-16 (ESV)

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; [16] yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Paul is deliberately picking up on a well known verse in Psalm 143

Psalm 143:1-2 (ESV) A Psalm of David. Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my pleas for mercy! In your faithfulness answer me, in your righteousness! [2] Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.

It had always been clear in the Old Covenant that the law, and law keeping would never be a basis for being right with God. The law was there to show God's people how they ought to live. He is a holy God. They were to be his holy people. But a vital part of the law of the Old Testament was always that Temple rituals, the ceremonies, the sacrifices. The people were reminded that they were guilty, deserving death. Yet God in his mercy provided a system of substitution. This animal is being killed, and cut up and barbecued in my place, for my sins, for my forgiveness.

The Temple was a slaughter house. It was full of the stench of death. Jesus' faithfulness: Verse 16 could mean that it is the faith of Jesus Christ Meaning his faithfulness Look also at 3:22 the faithfulness of Jesus Christ It is only through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, his innocence, his sacrifice in our place, and our faith in him that we can be forgiven and set free to know God and to serve him. So we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Can anyone be made right with God by keeping the law? The Judaisers were saying Yes – just work harder at it – if you are a Gentile be circumcised – gain assurance of your salvation by what you do!

6 Being Right With God

No way says Paul. The only way anyone can be right with God, can be justified is through faith in Jesus. Once you admit your own failure and look to Jesus' success in living God's way, to put your faith in his death in your place. On that basis you know that you are acceptable to God.

That's how you become a Christian. Importantly that is how you stay a Christian. If we step away from confidence in the finished work of Christ and put our trust in our own law keeping performance you are sunk.[17] But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! [18] For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. [19] For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. [20] It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. [21] I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

It is sad but true that there are many people in our society who do not know the healing power of God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ. The question is asked: If you died tonight do you think that you would go to heaven? The answer comes back: I would like to think so. The question is asked: If God says to you why should I let you in, what would you say? The answer comes back: I have lived a pretty good life. And the question is asked: Then why on earth did Jesus die on the cross?

Take for instance the story of the life of Albert Einstein.

He was the 20th century's greatest scientist. He was a genius and he won the Noble Prize for Physics in 1921. He cheated on his second wife Elsa with his secretary Betty Neumann.

It has been well known that he was not a very nice person – He committed adultery and he treated his wife and children very poorly.

Albert had been pretty nasty to his children – even at one point writing home and telling his wife: Regarding Eduard, maybe it would have been better if he would not have been born.

Recently they have discovered lots of letters in which he seems to be have been quite tender and affectionate

We now know that he had set aside some money for his divorced wife and the children and that he wrote saying that he enjoyed receiving Eduard's poems and pictures.

Does the news about these good things make up for the bad things.

Can we now have any confidence about Albert being a Christian because of these good things? Obviously not.

No matter how many good things we do it can never take away the stain of sin. There is no basis for self justification. Jesus is the only way that we can be right with God. He is now our reason for living and going on. See how Paul puts it in verse 20 [20] It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Look with me at Galatians 6:14. Is that your experience? Your faith expressed in life? Is that the basis of your prayer life and my prayer life? We need to have that deeper relationship with God that comes from confidence in God.

7 Confidence

Where is our confidence? If we think that we can be right with God through the good things that we do we will always be lacking in confidence. Have a done enough? Do the good things outweigh the bad? There are times when even the good things that we might do

become a source of pride and that is a bad thing! We can see a lack of confidence in our relationship with God reflected in our prayers. If we are saying to ourselves that God must not have heard my prayers and given me what I want because I have not done enough good deeds, or there must be something my life that he is not happy with, it shows that we lack the right sort of confidence in the finished work of Jesus on the cross.

When we trust in Jesus and his death in our place we can pray with confidence and faith that God hears our prayers and is able to grant our requests according to his loving will for our lives.

Through faith in Jesus we can know that we are justified before our Heavenly Father. Because of Jesus he regards us as righteous, just as if I had never sinned. As we sang in our first hymn:

And as he stands in victory, Sin's curse has lost its grip on me, For I am his and he is mine,

Bought with the precious blood of Christ.

We can be confident about our relationship with God.

Confident about his presence with us even in our darkest hour. Through the Power of the Holy Spirit.

Confident about our prayers being heard And confident about our destiny – We will be with him forever Even though our own lives may go up and down Our forgiveness is assured through the finished work of Christ. Our justification is based on his faithfulness.

In some ways it is sad to think of two great leaders of the church like Peter and Paul having a dispute in the church. But we are all only human We all need to submit ourselves to the Word of God.

It is great to know that Peter accepted Paul correction and they were able to work together in the cause of the gospel. When Peter comes to write his 2 letters he even commends Paul's writings in 2 Peter 3:15-16

I hope and pray that we will all be able to work and pray and grow together in Christian fellowship as we get to know one another.

You might even be able to stay on for supper tonight and share for a brief time there.