

Galatians 2:11-14

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The harmony of the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 did not last long. Soon thereafter, the Apostle Peter (Cephas) shows favoritism to Jewish believers who teach that Gentiles must obey the law, which is a serious misrepresentation of the Gospel. Paul rebukes Peter in front of everyone for his hypocrisy.

Here Paul describes how Peter (*Cephas*) stumbled in favor of legalism. The first ten verses of this chapter show how Paul and all the apostles and elders in Jerusalem took part in a council (Acts 15), where they established that Gentile believers did not need to assimilate to Jewish religious practice by being circumcised and following the Jewish religious rules. As Peter himself stated at the council, concerning the means of salvation from God, "He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:9).

However, in these verses, we see that even Peter was not immune to hypocrisy. Paul recounts that Peter visited Antioch. During this visit, Paul was obliged to point out Peter's sin. Peter *used to eat with the Gentiles*, but when *certain men from James* came to Antioch, Peter held *himself aloof* from the Gentiles, fearing the Jewish believers sent by James. The men from James were "authorities" and apparently were Jewish believers from Jerusalem who still adhered to the Old Testament Law, because Paul calls them *the party of the circumcision*. It isn't clear why James would send people as his deputies who did not represent the agreement reached at the Jerusalem council. Perhaps James did not know their position. Perhaps he had been swayed.

In any event, these men promoted the same principle as the men in verse 4, who said that Gentile believers such as Titus should be circumcised according to the Jewish law. Paul and the others at the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 had firmly opposed this demand that Gentiles assimilate to Jewish religious practice (Acts 15:5). All were united in Christ, not in the Jewish law. But now, this consensus was being undermined.

Peter showed preference to the men sent *from James* when they also came to the church in Antioch. Peter was one of the apostles from Jerusalem, a man held in high regard by most other believers. And in front of all these Gentile believers, Peter suddenly stopped breaking bread with them, and ate only with the Jewish believers. Paul reports that *the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy*—his example was followed even by Barnabas, who had spent years preaching the Gospel to Gentiles, and now refused to eat with them.

Paul, however, was given his mission by Jesus personally. He was friends with Peter, but not his follower. Earlier Paul clearly explained that he did not care about status among men, referencing the apostles in Jerusalem who had a good reputation, yet *what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality*. So, Paul rebuked Peter for his hypocrisy in associating with the competing authorities from Jerusalem and staying away from Gentile believers. Paul writes that he *saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel*. This segregationism led by Peter was corrupting the truth of the gospel.

Paul also makes clear Peter's motivation for exercising his hypocrisy: Peter didn't want to be excluded/rejected by the competing authorities from Jerusalem. Peter *began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision*. Peter did not want to be rejected. Rejection is a powerful tool used by people who want to gain followers. And, in fact, the same tool is being used upon the Galatians, for Paul will write in 4:17, "They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them."

One of the key features of this conflict is food. Old Testament law dictated a strict diet that excluded "unclean" foods. In Acts 10, Peter has a vision from God, where God brings all animals of the earth to Peter and commands him to kill and eat. Peter protests that he has never eaten anything common (unholy) or unclean. God replies, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy" (Acts 10:15). Food is symbolic of the division between Jews and Gentiles, where Israel is supposed to be the holy nation of God, and the Gentiles are common and unclean. Peter puzzles over his vision, but the rest of Acts 10 reveals the meaning.

A Roman centurion, Cornelius, a Gentile who fears God, brings Peter to his household, where Peter shares the gospel, explaining, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean" (Acts 10:28). The gospel of Jesus was for all men, not just the Jews. Peter realized this, adding, "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him" (Acts 10:34-35).

But now, after years of ministry and preaching the gospel, Peter falls into hypocrisy, and shows partiality. As great as Peter was, he still failed. That ought to give us great encouragement.

It is not made clear if eating *with the Gentiles* meant they were eating unclean food, or that they were eating their kosher food but alongside and in fellowship with the Gentiles. It is most likely the latter, since toward the end of Paul's ministry, when he lands in Rome, where he will be imprisoned and martyred, Paul addressed the Jewish leaders in Rome thusly: "After three days Paul called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, and when they came together, he began saying to them, 'Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans'" (Acts 28:17).

In saying he had *done nothing against the customs of our fathers*, Paul is asserting that he has kept the Jewish religious laws all along. This is also apparent in Acts 21:17-26, when Paul submits to some Jewish religious practices to prove that he is not teaching Jews to forsake the Law of Moses. Paul's behavior is consistent with the agreement at the Jerusalem council of Acts 15; the agreement is that Jews will continue to practice Jewish religious customs, but the Gentiles are free from such practices. The main point is that the two groups should exist together in harmony. So when Peter withdraws from fellowship with the Gentiles, he is breaking the Acts 15 agreement.

Paul writes that he did not take Peter aside privately. In *the presence of all* of the believers in Antioch, he rebuked him. In general, sin should be dealt with privately. But the exception is false teaching, which is to be dealt with publicly. Paul's rebuke is a passionate explanation of the unity found in Christ among believers, as well as a thorough condemnation of legalism, which is what the Galatians themselves had begun practicing. Paul begins by asking Peter, *If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?*

Paul is very simply and accurately calling out Peter's hypocrisy, "You're a Jew, Peter, and all this time you were eating with the Gentile believers. You ate in their presence because they have been made clean in Christ. And then these 'authorities' from Jerusalem show up and you snub your Gentile brothers so they won't reject you."

Biblical Text

¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. ¹³ The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"