“I HAVE BEEN CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST”

Galatians 2:1–21

Key Verse: 2:20

“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Can people ever really change? Some people change their outward appearance, but their inner person remains the same. We all probably know some people who are very set in their ways; for them to be changed may seem impossible. But in today’s passage we see that it is possible for someone to be truly changed, changed at the core. In this letter Paul is writing to Gentile Christians to help them have confidence in their newfound faith in Jesus. In chapter 1 he explains that we’re all called to live in the grace of Christ, not in legalism. Now in chapter 2 he shows that we’re also called to live in fellowship with one another, even though we may be so different. To isolate ourselves from other believers, thinking we’re superior, is not the truth of the gospel. Paul again shares a personal testimony of how his own relationship with Christ changed him and enabled him to get along with all kinds of people. In this study we especially want to learn what Paul’s words, “I have been crucified with Christ,” mean, and how we can share that same experience. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Look at verse 1. Here Paul picks up where he left off in chapter one, with his personal testimony. In 1:18 he said that three years after his conversion he went to Jerusalem. Now he says that fourteen years after his conversion he went to Jerusalem again, this time, with Barnabas and Titus. During those intervening years a church got started in Syrian Antioch. Today it’s called Antakya in Turkey. It was started during the Greek Empire and developed during the Roman Empire. During Paul’s time it was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, with over half a million residents. This church at Antioch was shockingly different. Antioch was the first Christian church made up primarily of Gentiles. The only other church at that time was in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church was the first Christian church, led by Peter and the original twelve apostles, and it was all Jewish. When they heard about this new church in Antioch, the Jerusalem church sent a man named Barnabas to go see about it. Barnabas “saw what the grace of God had done” among these Gentiles in Antioch. He encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts (Ac11:22,23). Then Barnabas went to look for Paul in his hometown of Tarsus, and he brought him to Antioch, where they both worked together teaching the Bible to these new believers (Ac11:25, 26). This church at Antioch became a giving church; during a severe famine they sent financial help to the Jerusalem church through Barnabas and Paul (Ac11: 27–30). The Antioch church also raised Gentiles as Bible teachers and leaders (Ac13:1); one of them was Titus, who was Greek (3). Titus from Antioch went on to become one of Paul’s greatest coworkers (2Co2:13; 7:6,13,14; 8:6,16,17,23; 12:18; Tit1:4). The Antioch church got together and sent Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey in the Roman Empire, to start these new Gentile churches in Galatia. So the Galatian Christians all knew Barnabas.

Paul goes on to explain his trip with Barnabas and Titus to Jerusalem. Read verse 2. Paul took this trip not randomly, but in response to God’s leading. When he got there, he had a private meeting with the church leaders. According to verse 9, they were James (the brother of Jesus), Peter (Cephas) and John. In this meeting Paul shared the message of good news about Jesus he had been explaining to Gentiles. He had been telling people, Jew and Greek, to turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus (Ac20:21). Paul felt that if the Jerusalem church opposed this message, all his ministry among the Gentiles would turn out to be in vain.

Look at verse 3. Paul purposely took Titus with him to Jerusalem as evidence of a Gentile who'd been changed by the gospel. During his visit to Jerusalem the leaders got to know Titus as a fine young Christian leader. So the pillars of the church thought it was totally unnecessary to have Titus circumcised. It was a great victory for Paul and for the gospel.

But why did this matter arise? Read verse 4. These false believers claimed to be Christians. But they were insisting that Gentiles needed to be circumcised in order to be saved (Ac15:1,2). They went to the Antioch church like spies, to judge these new believers who were living in the grace of God. They were very suspicious of the freedom in Christ that they practiced. Paul had been very clear with them. Read verse 5. Paul refused to compromise with their legalism even a little bit. It was so that he might preserve the truth of the gospel. What is the truth of the gospel? The truth of the gospel is that no matter who we are, we’re saved only by faith in the grace of Jesus, not by our works (Eph2:8,9). The truth of the gospel is that no matter who we are, this faith sets us free—free from our sins and free from all kinds of legalism. The truth of the gospel is that no matter who we are, we receive the Holy Spirit, who gives us hope. The truth of the gospel is that no matter who we are, we express our faith in Jesus through love (5:1–6). As Christians we don’t need to learn rules and laws; no matter who we are, we need to learn how to live by faith in Jesus. We learn from Paul that this truth of the gospel needs to be preserved and passed on to all the people of the world.

Paul goes on to describe the conclusion of this meeting. Read verses 6–10. It turned out to be a most successful meeting. The Jerusalem church leaders recognized Paul’s mission from God (7) and they recognized the grace God had given him (9). They even extended to Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship (9). It means they fully accepted them as brothers, partners and equals in Christ, and they also fully accepted their ministry to Gentiles. In this way Paul protected his Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ. It tells us how important it is not to be critical and judgmental, but to recognize and accept what God is doing in and through others by his grace.

But the controversy was not over. Read verses 11–14. It’s shocking that Peter and even Barnabas caved in to peer pressure from fellow Jews, not to have fellowship with Gentile Christians. It may have seemed like a smart compromise at the time. But Paul would have none of it. He said they were “not acting in line with the truth of the gospel.” This expression means a lot. It means we can believe the truth of the gospel in theory, but not live it out in our practical lives. We can do this in many ways. We can compromise with sinful behavior. But we can also avoid having fellowship with other Christians simply because they’re different from us. The truth of the gospel is that we’re all children of God through faith in Christ. The truth of the gospel is that we’re all clothed with Christ. The truth of the gospel is that we’re not primarily Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female—we’re all one in Christ (3:26–29). If we believe that truth, then we need to treat one another with genuine respect and love, as dear children of God, heavenly princes and princesses. To do that, we need to get out of our comfort zone. We need to embrace people on the basis of their faith in Jesus, not on their personalities or if we like them or not personally.

Paul explains that Jews and Gentiles share the same faith. Read verses 15,16. Even Jewish Christians knew they were justified only by faith in Jesus. The works of the law are all kinds of efforts to gain God’s approval. The Jews kept rituals and ethical and moral rules to be right with God. But it didn’t work, because they could never keep these rules perfectly. What does it mean to be “justified”? It means that God declares us “not guilty.” God himself wipes away or expunges all our bad records of sin, when we simply repent and accept Jesus. Paul also cleared up a misunderstanding about God’s grace. Read verses 17,18. Simply, it means that we cannot go on sinning in the name of grace (Ro6:1,2). Paul explained his own experience with the law. Read verse 19. What does it mean that through the law he died to the law? It means the law exposed Paul’s sin. Only when he overcame his own self-righteousness and realized what a terrible sinner he was in the sight of God could he be ready to accept the truth of the gospel of God’s grace. When he did, then he could stop living for his own pride and glory and truly live for God (cf. Ro7:4).

Read verse 20. Here Paul says some things about himself and about Christ. He says he’s been crucified with Christ. He says he no longer lives. He says he now lives “by faith.” He says Christ lives in him. He says Christ is “the Son of God.” And he says Christ loved him and gave himself for him. What does it mean to be “crucified with Christ”? First of all, it means to deeply accept the gospel. It means to accept that my old self was crucified with Jesus on the cross, so that I should no longer be a slave to sin (Ro6:6). Only Christ’s crucifixion can really set me free from my sin, not my zeal or efforts. Secondly, to be crucified with Christ means to die to myself so that I might truly live for God. Without being crucified with Christ, we’re still full of ourselves. We’re constantly thinking of ourselves, our honor and glory and what others are thinking of us. But when we’re crucified with Christ, we’re free of ourselves, free to truly love God and free to truly love others. Finally, to be crucified with Christ means to deeply accept the cross of suffering as the core of Christian life. When we embrace the cross, we humble ourselves and sacrifice ourselves in order to save others. When we’re crucified with Christ, we’re no longer full of complaints, or thinking we’re doing others a great favor, but full of deep thanks for what Jesus has done for us.

Paul says that “Christ lives in me.” Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (Eph3:17). But Christ dwelling in us isn’t just for our personal enjoyment. Only as we daily identify with Christ who died on the cross will Christ live in us and reveal the glory of his death and resurrection. Before accepting the gospel Paul lived by his own strength and willpower. After accepting the gospel Paul lived by faith in Jesus. It means he now depended on Jesus, not on himself. This was the secret of his fruitful life as a minister of Christ to the Gentiles—living by faith in Jesus.

Perhaps the most important part of verse 20 is Paul’s personal conviction about Christ. Now that he accepted the gospel, Paul was sure that Jesus loved him and gave himself for him. He was sure of the love of God through the grace of Jesus on the cross. When he tried to keep the law, he could never be fully sure of God’s love and approval. But by accepting that Christ died for him, Paul became absolutely sure of God’s love for him (Ro8:37–39). This assurance of God’s personal love enabled Paul to live as a good shepherd for Gentiles. We too need to be sure of Jesus’ love for us. It may seem like a small thing, but it’s the most important thing in life. When we’re not sure of God’s love personally, we have no real love in us to give to others. But when we’re sure of God’s love, we have a fountain of love within us to share with all kinds of people.

Read verse 20 again. May God enable us to experience being crucified with Christ so that Christ may live in us. May he especially give us the conviction that Jesus loves me and gave himself for me.