

5. Confronting hypocrisy

November 29, 2012

If you want to make a born-again Christian mad or at least upset at you, use these four words – “You are a hypocrite.” And remember to duck right after you said that.

No one is immune to the allure of legalism, with its glittering promise of membership in the “Holier-Than-Thou Club.” No one, not me, not you. Not even someone you’d think would surely know better – like the apostle Peter after he experienced the forgiveness and restoration by Jesus for his three denials. The moment we take our spiritual guard down, we will be sucked into it before we know what is going on.

I find that we get into hypocrisy because of two reasons:

- 1) **Pride**
- 2) **Fear of what others might think of us**

Confronting hypocrisy is not an easy thing to do, especially when the person whom you are about to confront is a prominent Christian leader or someone whom many people respect including yourself.

Some would argue, “Can’t we just get along without confrontation?” No, hypocrisy is hideous. What cancer is to the body, hypocrisy is to the church. It is a killing agent. Unfortunately, hypocrisy is also addictive. And even though Jesus reserved His most severe words of condemnation for the hypocrite, many people still seem to prefer that lifestyle to truth and authenticity. If we don’t take care of it at the beginning point, it will infect the rest of the body.

We are going to see how apostle Paul confronted apostle Peter in this portion of the study tonight. But before we go there, I think that it is important for us to see Peter’s first encounter with the Gentiles in Joppa, Israel.

A. MEETING CORNELIUS

Acts 10:10b-16 he fell into a trance 11 and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. 13 And a voice came to him, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” 14 But Peter said, “Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.” 15 And a voice spoke to him again the second time, “What God has cleansed you must not call common.” 16 This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again.

Peter was perplexed, but the mystery was about to unravel. While he was reflecting on the vision, three men sent by God showed up at Simon the Tanner’s place.

Acts 10:22 And they said, “Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you.”

Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, was considered “unclean” by the Jews no matter how much he feared God and had a good reputation among the Jews, because he was a Gentile.

But the Lord made it clear to Peter that nothing should be considered unclean that God had declared clean. God wanted Peter to take the Gospel to the home of Cornelius and to the Gentiles. When Peter preached Christ to all the people assembled in the centurion's house, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues – just as the Jews had done at Pentecost. These new Gentile believers were baptized, and Peter stayed with them for a few days. This was unthinkable for any orthodox Jew including Peter himself before.

God's message was clear: Salvation in Jesus Christ was as much for the Gentiles as it was for the Jews. These new believers were no longer "unclean" but corecipients of the grace of God. As new creations in Christ, Jew and Gentile were now part of the same family. What a major turning point in the life of the church!

Before we criticize Peter's previous thinking, perhaps we had better examine our own lives to see how many familiar Bible doctrines we are actually obeying. As you examine church history, you see that, even with a complete Bible, believers through the years have been slow to believe and practice the truths of the Christian faith.

When we think of the persecution and discrimination that have been practiced in the name of Christ throughout the church history, it embarrasses us. It is one thing for us to defend a doctrine in a church meeting, and quite something else to put it into practice in everyday life. When we don't, we become hypocrites. It is that simple.

B. PETER'S RELAPSE

Galatians 2:11-13 Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; 12 for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. 13 And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.

Not only did Peter overcome the old Jewish dietary laws, but he also truly embraced wholeheartedly this new freedom and fellowship with the Gentiles after his visit to the household of Cornelius.

As v11 started, if this was the movie we are watching, we might hear a heavy music in minor keys for the upcoming trouble in the church of Antioch. Here came the representatives of the Jerusalem church to the church of Antioch in their black trench coats with the collars up.

Peter's freedom was threatened by Peter's fear. Why do I think that Peter was fearful of the Jews who came from Jerusalem? For one thing, we know that Peter was an impulsive man. He could show amazing faith and courage one minute by declaring that Jesus the Messiah, the Son of the Living God and fail completely the next; he walked on the water to go to Jesus, but then became frightened and began to sink; he boasted in the Upper Room that he would willingly die with Jesus, and then denied his Lord three times.

There are two tragedies to Peter's fall. First, it made him a hypocrite. Peter pretended that his actions were motivated by faithfulness to the law, when they were really motivated by fear. How easy it is to use "Bible doctrine" to cover up our disobedience!

The second tragedy is that Peter led others astray with him, even Barnabas was involved. Barnabas had been one of the spiritual leaders of the church in Antioch, so his disobedience would have a tremendous influence on the others in the fellowship.

This is why any spiritual leaders' fall, such as pastors or elders, within the church can cause devastating effects in the body of Christ.

Paul does not suggest that James sent these men to investigate Peter, or even that they were officials of the Jerusalem church. No doubt they belonged to the "circumcision group" and wanted to lead the Antioch church back into religious legalism.

Does this mean that Peter rejected the Gospel of Jesus Christ that is available to all mankind? Of course not. Out of fear of reproof from influential Jews, he acted contrary to his beliefs. Though he didn't abandon the faith, Peter's actions were still serious. Why? Because he was sending mixed signals to the Gentile believers. He was blurring the message of the Gospel and obscuring the freedom it provides. Apostle Paul recognized that the Gospel and the future of the church were at stake.

C. PAUL'S REBUKE

Galatians 2:14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?"

Since Peter's action was done in public, Paul confronted him publicly in the presence of all. I say that was gutsy. Paul didn't do this to embarrass Peter or to make himself look good and more powerful than Peter, rather the truth was at stake.

D. THE OUTCOME

Since most commentators agree that the council meeting in Acts 15 convened after Paul confronted Peter at Antioch, it appears that Peter did indeed leave his hypocrisy behind.

Though Peter was impulsive, he was the man of God and was sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Later, he wrote in his 2 Peter about apostle Paul in such a complimenting way. By the way, 2 Peter was written after Paul was arrested and stuck in prison.

2 Peter 3:15 and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation--as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you,

E. A FEW THINGS TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE CONFRONTATION

1) Base the charges on absolute truth.

Take time to get all the facts before you point your finger. No hearsay.

2) Wait for God's timing.

Confronting a person too early, while emotions are turbulent, can do more harm than good. Always wait for God's timing.

3) Use wise wording.

Nathan didn't accuse David right away. He softened his heart with a word picture. Plan your words carefully before you talk to the person.

Proverbs 25:11 A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.

4) Do it with courage.

No one likes to be confronted. We always run the risk of straining a relationship or even losing a friend. But the risk is well worth the reward when the person is restored.

Proverbs 27:6 Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.

5) Most of all, do all confrontations to restore that person in love, not to shot down.

Galatians 6:1 Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.