"The Gospel and Conflict"
Galatians 2:11-16
March 28, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

We are concluding today our series of sermons on the gospel-centered life. We have seen how the gospel alone is able to change us from the inside-out, and we are focusing today on the way those changes equip us for conflict. If we are honest, most of us have a desire to avoid conflict. The four words a husband most wants not to hear from his wife are the words, "Let's talk about us." He fears that this conversation will involve some conflict, and he wants to avoid that. Or consider your response when you get that phone call with the request from the caller for a meeting at your earliest convenience. You can tell from the tone of voice, as well as the history of the relationship, that this person wants to talk to you about something you have done or said that they find objectionable. You agree to the meeting only because you can't think of any way to escape it, but there is a dread in your heart. Then you begin to anticipate what the issue of the conflict might be and prepare in your mind your arguments and justifications.

When the gospel begins to bring the deep changes of the heart that we need, it changes our approach to conflict. Paradoxically, the gospel leads us into some conflicts and out of others. It leads us into the conflicts we need to have and out of the conflicts we should be avoiding. This morning's passage features a conflict that had arisen in the church in Antioch between the two chief apostles in the church, Peter and Paul. As we look at their conflict, we are going to consider the nature of the conflict as well as Peter's bad example and Paul's good example in handling the conflict.

I. The Issue of the Conflict

This conflict arose in the church in Antioch, a prominent city in the Roman Empire. The church in this city was also of some prominence, being the first church planted outside of Israel. It was established following the persecution of Christians that broke out in Jerusalem with the stoning of Stephen.

Paul had a special relationship with this church. Shortly after his conversion, his friend Barnabas called for him to come help disciple the new believers in this church, many of whom were Gentiles. So Paul had been one of the leaders in this church. This was also his sending church when he and Barnabas left on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3). So it must have been particularly painful for him to see the difficulties that had arisen in this church. It was now on the verge of a major and catastrophic split.

The main issue that gave rise to this conflict was the issue of table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles in the church. One of the challenges we have in understanding this issue is the fact that our modern views of eating are very different than those in ancient cultures. In our fast food culture, eating is a necessity to be taken care of in an efficient manner. But in ancient cultures, the acquisition and preparation of food required a major expenditure of a family's time and money. As a result, eating took on a religious significance. In Israel, there were ceremonial laws directing the Jews about what they could or could not eat. A group of foods had been called unclean and put off limits for Jewish diets. In addition, Judaism developed an entire set of kosher laws that arose out of a requirement for the complete separation of meat and dairy products. They applied it so strictly that Jews were required to maintain two separate sets of cookware, one for dairy products and the other for meat. Though nowhere in the Old Testament did it forbid Jewish people from eating with Gentiles, it's not hard to see how such a restriction developed. If you were Jewish and your Gentile friends invited you to dinner, how could you be sure that they had met all the requirements for the food? Maybe they put a little bacon into the green beans for seasoning. Even if you were careful to pick out the little pieces, some of the juice from the bacon would have passed into the beans, with the result that you would be eating unclean food. So it became the common practice for Jews never to eat with Gentiles.

These Jewish scruples against eating with Gentiles became a real problem for the church in Antioch, which consisted of a large number of Jewish and Gentile believers. Under Paul's teaching, they had learned that God had made all foods clean, with the result that Jewish and Gentiles Christians were eating together. Peter had likely also told them of his vision before he went to visit Cornelius, and the command of God for him to eat the food that was formerly unclean. So all seemed to be going smoothly in the church, until something happened that brought great trouble. Some Jewish Christians came to Antioch from Jerusalem. It seems that they were influential men, and they took the view that Jewish Christians were still under the ceremonial laws of Judaism, including the dietary restrictions. Peter was afraid of these men, and he acted in a cowardly manner by beginning to withdraw from the Gentile Christians in the church until eventually he would not eat with them at all. Since Peter was a leader of great influence, the separation between Jew and Gentile in the church began to spread until all the Jewish Christians had severed their fellowship with Gentile Christians. We can hear Paul's pain in his words, **"even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy"** (v. 13). Paul's friend and co-worker, Barnabas, was now on the other side of a church fight. It seems clear that this conflict had the potential to lead to a permanent division in the church between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

II. Peter's Bad Example in the Conflict

Peter shows us the two most common, sinful responses to conflict: fear and coercion. Paul says in verse 12 that the reason Peter changed his behavior from eating with the Gentiles to that of withdrawing from them is that he feared the circumcision party. He doesn't tell us the exact nature of this fear, but I think it likely that he simply feared their disapproval. These were influential leaders from Jerusalem, likely well-educated Pharisees who had converted to Christianity. Though Peter was a leader himself, he was just a plain fisherman and lacked the credentials these men would have had. Peter had shown himself prone to the fear of the disapproval of others in the past, most notably to the young girl before whom he denied that he knew Jesus right after Jesus' arrest.

Peter exhibits a fear of conflict that keeps him from confronting these men as he should. Such a fear is all too common, isn't it? We live in a culture that values affirmation and encouragement, and that's a good thing. The Bible values that as well. The irony, however, is that unless we have a willingness to confront people honestly from time to time, we lose the ability to encourage. At the gym where I work out, I noticed that at the end of my workout, my stationary bicycle flashed the message across the screen that said, "Great workout!" I usually do work very hard at my workouts, but I was curious as to whether this was a real message giving me real feedback, or just a programmed message that said the same thing no matter how hard you worked. So I did a test by setting the bicycle at its easiest level, pedaling for one minute, and waiting to see what message I would get. It was the same "Great Workout!" message. Knowing that, I now find no encouragement in this messasge. I call this the Simon Cowell principle. In case you don't know who Mr. Cowell is, he is one of the judges on American Idol. He is known for his frequent critiques of singers, which at times can be brutal. But I have also noticed that his encouragement means more to the contestants than that of any other judge. I'm not suggesting that we should brutally confront others when they fall short. I am suggesting that if we never confront others honestly, we will also never be able to encourage them.

Peter's behavior also fell short in a way that was opposite of his fear of others. He was also coercive, indicated by Paul's question of him in verse 14: **"How can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"** He was unwilling to have the conflict that needed to happen through confronting the leaders from Jerusalem, but now engages in a conflict he should not have had. He is coercive and manipulative in this conflict, exerting his power in an inappropriate way over Gentile Christians. He was probably resorting to his apostolic status to tell the Gentile Christians that if they really wanted God's approval, they would need to begin observing these Jewish dietary laws. Peter was doing the same thing bad parents do. How many times have you seen parents who fail to have the necessary conflicts with their children, confronting them in loving and appropriate ways, only to blow up at them and start yelling later in a coercive attempt at proper behavior?

Why did Peter fail in the ways he did? Paul finds the roots of it in his failure to apply the gospel to his life. He says that Peter's **"conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel"** (v. 14). Of course, Peter knew and believed the gospel. But like us, he failed to apply it in a practical way to his life in this particular incident. He believed it but wasn't living it at this time. How would applying the gospel have helped Peter enter into this conflict in a proper way? It would have delivered him from life under the mask. Do you know what I mean by that phrase? We tend to cope with life by choosing a mask for ourselves, an image of ourselves that defines the way we want others to see us. If we can succeed in establishing this image of ourselves, then we think that life will work for us. Some choose the mask of success in a career, while others opt for putting on the kind of persona that will make others like them. Paul uses this language of the mask in our passage, and it's found in the word "hypocrite". This word in Greek is literally "under the mask," from its origins in Greek theater. A hypocrite is one who lives under the mask. The gospel allows us to take off the mask and live honestly and genuinely. We don't need the identity we think the mask provides, because Jesus has given us a new identity. We are now forgiven sons and daughters, clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

Had Peter's conduct been in step with the gospel, he would not have fallen into fear and coercion. The gospel would have delivered Peter from a fear of the disapproval of these influential leaders from Jerusalem. Peter was willing to elevate the approval of these men to the highest value in his life. It was a higher value than honoring the vision he had received back in Acts 10, where he was commanded to eat the unclean food that God was now making clean. It was a higher value than loving the Gentiles and the unity of the church in Antioch. Their approval became such a high value for him because the approval of God through Jesus Christ became a low value. When we live in the fresh reality of God's delight in us through Jesus, the disapproval of others may still hurt, but it won't destroy. The owner of the goose that lays the golden egg isn't destroyed if he misplaces one of the eggs.

The gospel would also have delivered Peter from his attempt to coerce the Gentiles to embrace Jewish dietary restrictions. Peter needed the Gentile Christians to do this for his own sake, not for theirs. It would help him look good and feel good about himself to have them embrace his Jewish values. He was probably feeling a kind of superiority over this issue. The gospel delivers us in this by teaching that we are not superior in ourselves at all. Anything good that we possess comes as a gift.

III. Paul's Good Example in the Conflict

Paul confronted Peter face to face and publicly. Of course, not every sin needs to be confronted. Proverbs 19:11 says that it is man's glory to overlook

an offense. Most offenses ought to be overlooked. But when it becomes clear that more harm will come from overlooking than from confronting a sin in another, it is time to confront. And Paul shows us here that such confrontation is to be done face-to-face, not behind one's back. Paul did not complain about Peter's behavior to others, but went straight to Peter.

Paul also confronted Peter publicly. Most sins will not require public confrontation, but should be handled privately. Paul made an exception here because Peter was a leader in the church, and his sin had such widespread influence.

One final thing we can infer about Paul's approach to conflict is that his chief concern was love, not winning an argument. I say that simply because Paul doesn't report the outcome of this clash of apostolic titans. From other evidence throughout the New Testament, it is obvious that Paul did indeed prevail in this conflict. But Paul doesn't mention that, simply because winning wasn't his goal. Love was his goal. He wanted to love Peter and he wanted to love the church as he defended the church from Peter's legalism.

Paul is our example in conflict not because he is just more skilled or disciplined, but because he was doing the very thing Peter failed to do. He was applying the gospel to this area of conflict. Only the good news of God's unmerited favor upon us can give this potent combination of love and courage. As we prepare ourselves for the Lord's Supper, let's apply the gospel to this area of conflict.

CONCLUSION:

Is there a conflict you need to have? The need doesn't arise out of some need in you, but out of a need in the other. Let the gospel give you the courage to enter into this conflict. You very well may incur this person's disapproval, or even wrath. But your identity is in Christ, not their approval.

As a final application, let us rejoice today that we are invited to have table fellowship with our Lord. Paul was willing to go to the mat for this truth. He reminds us of it in verses 15-16. I believe the NIV captures well the sense of verse 15 by placing the phrase "Gentile sinners" in quotations, indicating a technical meaning that refers to this very controversy. In other words, Paul is correcting Peter's harmful attitude that the Gentile Christians were still sinners because they did not observe these Jewish dietary laws. On the other hand, the Jewish Christians, in Peter's view, were more pure because of their observance of the law. So let us rejoice this morning that we are invited to enjoy this table with God himself. We are like the sinners Jesus ate with during his earthly ministry. We are forgiven and made pure only by his broken body and shed blood. It is his performance, not ours, that makes us worthy to dine with him.