

HAPPY 11th BIRTHDAY OAK HILLS

The Life We Now Live

TEXT: GALATIANS 2:11-20 (ESV)



Pastor Russ Ramsey
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Oak Hills Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park, Kansas

Eleven Years

On the 1st Sunday of the year we celebrate Oak Hills' birthday. The image to the left there is a copy of the charter letter petitioning the Heartland Presbytery to officially recognizing Oak Hills as a particular congregation of the Presbyterian Church in America. The letter is dated Nov 1998.

Since then and in years before, God has been building this church. When we read what the Bible says about the purpose of the church in this world, we see God means to build it big—not necessarily in terms of facility size or membership, but big in making disciples of Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Today we're going to talk about the way the Lord tears down as He builds. The Good News of the Gospel is that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and by nothing else—**grace plus nothing**. But we're so prone to add to that. Much of the Lord's building work involves demolition, doesn't it—tearing down the additions and mini-camps we add on. God has called this church to know & make knowing His astonishing grace. It is a solemn, holy call meant to bring glory to His name and give us wilder, fuller lives than we could ever imagine, much less assemble for ourselves. So today we celebrate Oak Hills' birthday with a cake and a challenge from Galatians to cling to the good news of "grace plus nothing" as we grow.

Galatians 2:11-20

¹¹When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹²For 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. ¹³And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

¹⁴But 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?" ¹⁵We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶yet 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.

¹⁷But 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! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. ¹⁹For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. ²⁰I have been crucified with Christ. 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.

Rebuilding What We Tore Down (vs 11-14)

I'd love to say that the life of a church is like a straight line ascending ever upward to the standard Christ has called us to. I'd love to say that we dealt with overcoming legalism during our 1st decade, so now in our 2nd we don't have to be on our guard about that anymore. But if the Apostle Peter—who walked on water with Jesus (Mt 14:29) and preached at Pentecost, seeing thousands come to faith (Ac 2)—could rebuild the "grace plus works" gospel Christ had torn down, surely we can to.

Our text comes in the context of Paul discussing the time he openly opposed Peter for favoring one group of Christians over another. What happened? The early days of the Christian Church in Asia Minor were exciting, even revolutionary. Jews and Gentiles were coming together as brothers and sisters, joined to one another by their faith in Jesus Christ. It was huge!

One of the most tangible expressions of this could be seen when Jews and Gentiles came together at the same tables to eat as one family. Back then, table fellowship was a significant sign of trust. What a testimony! That diverse group told the world they had "put on the new self, renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. There is not Greek & Jew, circumcised & uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all." (Col 3:10-11)

Well, around 49AD, Peter came to visit Paul who was pastoring in Antioch. During his stay, some Jewish converts, likely from the Jerusalem church planted by James, also arrived. Apparently they insisted on keeping the Jewish ceremonial diet, which would've nixed the idea of sharing a table with the ceremonially unclean. Peter, a Jew himself, felt the pressure and withdrew from the Gentiles at meals. This was the rebuilding of a wall the Lord had torn down. This troubled Paul for three reasons.

First: The Gospel itself was at stake. Paul said, "Their conduct wasn't in step with the truth of the Gospel." (Gal 2:14) To favor the Jews could only convey the idea that God favored the Jews. Peter's actions said there were 2nd classes believers if Gentiles didn't add to the work of Christ certain other traditions and customs. This was justification by grace plus race—Gentile Christians needed to believe in Jesus & also act like Jews. (Gal 2:14)

How easy it is for a church to become a mini-camp which says, "To belong here, you have to believe in Jesus and act like us." That kills diversity. Oak Hills is not a very racially diverse church. And while I don't think this is because we oppose diversity, I also don't believe we've really been tested here. I pray we will be. What I do know is that diversity in the church develops less from the pulpit than it does from the dinner table. May the Lord move this church toward and not away from greater diversity and deeper love for one another in Christ in our 2nd decade.

Second, Peter's behavior was hypocrisy, not conviction.

Before this occurred, the Lord visited Peter in a vision for the purpose of showing him there was no distinction between Jew and Greek in God's sight: "God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean." (Ac 10:28) Peter did not favor the Jews because he had a change of opinion. He was afraid of what the men from James might think. Paul called it "hypocrisy."

Where are we gravitating toward this kind of hypocrisy, regarding others as common or unclean? Is there anyone here you're hoping to avoid this morning for no other reason than you just don't like them, or worse, you don't want to appear that you do? What is behind that in your heart? Paul told the Philippians, "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves." (Phil 2:3) To profess faith in Christ while thinking you are better than others is hypocrisy—it runs contrary to the Gospel. Sometimes the Lord blesses us with people who see our subtle retreat from other and call us on it. But we shouldn't wait for such friends to come around. We should examine our own hearts here before the Lord.

Third: Peter's hypocrisy was not a "victimless" crime. The sober reality here is that Peter's actions had consequences. When he favored the Jews, others followed his lead. When Paul tells us even Barnabas was led astray by Peter's hypocrisy, we need to understand that this was astonishing to Paul—an "et tu, Barnabas?" kind of moment. Why? Acts 15 tells us. When Paul and Barnabas were ministering in Antioch, some men from Judea came teaching, "Unless you are circumcised, you cannot be saved." Luke tells us, "Paul and Barnabas had no small dissention with them." (Ac 15:2) They fought for the "grace plus nothing" Gospel! They traveled to Jerusalem to settle the question with the apostles. The answer from the apostles, which included Peter by the way, was that God makes no distinction between Jew and Gentile, and cleanses both by faith in Christ. (Ac 15:30)

Barnabas and Paul had seen the Gospel perverted before, and as a unified front they stood for truth! But now Barnabas, Paul's dear friend in ministry who not only labored beside him but fought for the purity of the Gospel, opposing false teachers, joined Peter in his hypocrisy. Paul knew Barnabas knew it was wrong. As Christians, we cannot say to the world around us, "Don't follow my lead," because Christ calls us to give our lives away in leading others to Him. (Mt 28:19-20, Ac 1:8) Of course it is the Holy Spirit who draws hearts to Christ, but the means God so often uses is the witness of His church. People will follow our example. What example are we setting? What drives us?

Legalism and Justification (vs 15-17)

The question Oak Hills and every single one of us needs to ask is as timeless as it is essential. Job asked it this way: "How can a man be in the right before God?" (Job 25:4) It is Paul's central question in this text: If we were created to know and enjoy God forever, but are all sinful people, how can we be justified, or made right with God? To answer, we need to define the word "justification." This is a theological term we must be familiar with if we're to have any assurance that our salvation is secure in Christ alone.

So what is "justification?" It is a legal term John Stott describes as "the exact opposite of condemnation." To be justified is to be declared not guilty, or to put it in the positive, innocent and guiltless. When OJ was acquitted of murder, hardly anyone heard the "not guilty" verdict and thought, "Well, that means he must be innocent." The outcomes of the following civil suits made that plain. OJ was acquitted, but not justified.

Beyond simply being acquitted of wrong-doing, justification carries authoritative security. To be justified is to be declared righteous by God. Not only are you not guilty, you are, in fact, innocent—spotless, clean, unimpeachable. And this is the aim of God's redemptive plan, to so fully redeem His people that they are not only not-guilty, they are actually righteous in His sight. There are no technicalities or loopholes in God's justice system; no evidence thrown out. We are actually made clean in such a way that when the only Judge that matters looks at us, we are declared righteous, without caveat, qualification or question.

The Life We Now Live (vs 18-20)

So what is it that justifies us before God if not our good works? Christ alone! Scripture is clear: our works can't save us if for no other reason than the fact that our best works are still not righteous. "We've all become like one unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment." (Isa 64:6) Our text today comes as a sober warning that even the most mature, gifted, zealous, self-sacrificing believer among us can easily revert to subtle but nonetheless real habits of self-salvation. But Paul doesn't leave us without help. In verses 18-20, he talks of how the grace of Christ doesn't just change how we think. It changes our lives.

If we were to look to the Law for our standing before God, Paul tells us the Law will expose us as law-breakers. If we rebuild a life of salvation by rule-keeping, the Law will prove us to be condemned, since we will all fail to keep it. (v 18) We need something other than law-keeping to be justified before God. We need an advocate. "Through the Law, I died to the law," Paul says, (meaning he knew he couldn't look to the Law for eternal life) "that I might live to God." (v 19) The ESV Study Bible comments that the believer is "no longer under the impossible burden of trying to earn God's acceptance with Christ through his own efforts." If we are to find acceptance before God, we must find it in Christ and nowhere else. Grace plus nothing. Grace plus nothing!

This crucifies the law-keeper in us. Paul says, "I've been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me." (v 20a) Believers are liberated from trying to justify ourselves by our flimsy moralism & rule-keeping. Any need to save ourselves died with Jesus' crucifixion. If we're in Christ, we live a new life now. "The life I now live, I live by faith in the son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." (v 20b) It is a rich life of day-by-day humble reliance upon our Lord to hold us up. This life is a gift given by the Son of God who gave Himself up for us out of love. When Jesus Christ gave Himself up for His people, it was the decisive final nail in the coffin of hoping in rule-keeping and appearances to save us. If we look to those things for our justification, all we'll find is condemnation and death.

As Oak Hills celebrates 11 years, I hope we see this text as more than a warning to avoid error. That warning is there, along with the humbling example of Peter, who, though he had closer access to Christ than anyone, still fell to the pressures of wanting to be justified in the eyes of men, even if it meant denying the justification of Christ for a moment. This is about so much more than how not to live. It is about how to live well. Jesus Christ liberates us from the paralyzing burden of guilt.

This is the life we now live. It is a life of bold confidence in the perfect, finished work of Christ. May we never move away from this. May we never pursue appearances out of a fear of man, rebuilding what the Gospel tore down. But even more, may the Lord give us the grace to pursue His call with a zealous passion to glorify His name. And may the way we live be our witness.