

Paul's Letter to the Galatians

The Unencumbered Gospel of Jesus

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A Brief Introduction

The book of Galatians is in the first group of letters written by Paul: 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans. These letters were written sometime between AD 47 and AD 58 when Paul was on his various missionary journeys. All these epistles, except for Romans, were written by Paul and his companions to correct, encourage, and instruct the churches who he ministered among in his ministry. Romans, which has many close parallels to Galatians, is the only letter written by Paul during this time to a church he had never visited.

Scholars have written thousands of pages about when Galatians was specifically written, and after reading all these various pages, the best you could ever say is when you *think* it was composed. According to all the evidence we have about this letter, there is not a single person who can say they *know* when it was written. For that purpose, we will spend no more time on it than we have already.

Instead, it is much more profitable to discuss the historical setting for the book.

With the introduction of the Gentiles into the Christian community, a question on everyone's mind concerned the relationship between the Gentile Christians the Law. Beginning with the pouring out of the Spirit in Acts 2, the Jewish Christians didn't suddenly stop keeping the Law. Peter, for example, appeals to the traditions in which he was raised as his primary reason for being reluctant to eat the unclean meat on his sheet and visit Cornelius (Acts 10:10ff, 28). Furthermore, the Christians continued to meet in synagogues and attend the feast days.¹

The main contention some of the Pharisee believers had with Paul and his Gentile converts was circumcision. In Acts 15, the church in Jerusalem called a conference to determine what they should do about this situation. In the end, they decided to not bind circumcision, and the whole Law, on the Gentile converts.

Galatians was written to address this issue and to correct some of the Galatian Christians who were considering adopting circumcision and other tenants of the Law which the Judaizing teachers attempting to bind. Thus, I made the subtitle "The Unencumbered Gospel of Jesus" because the letter is in many ways relevant for us today

¹ In James 2:2, he addresses a problem going on in their "assembly." The word here is not the word for "church" (*ekklēsia*) but the word for synagogue (*synagōgē*). It is the only time I could find in the New Testament where it isn't translated synagogue. James, of course, was written to Jewish Christians.

since the very problems Paul addressed manifest themselves in various ways and through different means and methods throughout Christian history.

The goal of this class is to give you a better appreciation for the gospel of Christ. Some secondary goals are to address the Christian's relationship to the Law, better understand the promise made to Abraham, and grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. This will empower us to be effective ministers in the kingdom of God by giving us confidence in Christ, patience with one another, and love for all.

Finally, the basic outline we will follow is broken into three parts: apologetic (Galatians 1-2), polemic (Galatians 3-5:12), and encouragement (Galatians 5:13-6:18).² An apologetic is a formal defense or justification of a religious doctrine. In this section, Paul will recount his own conversion to Christianity and the origin of his mission to the Gentiles. In the polemic section, Paul attacks the "other gospel" that was leading some of the Gentiles away. Finally, in the encouragement section, the apostle uses all the principles laid out in the earlier sections to build up the Christians now that they are better aware of the blessings available to them in Jesus.

Galatians 1-2—Apologetic

Galatians 1:1-5—Introduction

Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through human agency, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.

Galatians 1:1-2

Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through human agency, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia:

Paul gives a summary of his life and knowledge of the Jewish religion later in chapter 1. After doing that, he gives a defense of His apostleship (Galatians 1:11-16). This is what he alludes to in the first verse when he points out that his apostleship did not come **from the order of men or through human agency**. Apparently, there were some who were so fed up with Paul's Law-free gospel to the Gentiles that they had begun to call his apostleship in question. As Paul discusses in 2 Corinthians 12:12, there were

² Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament and Exegetical and Critical Commentary* (1976).

distinct signs that accompanied the office of the apostle: “The distinguishing marks of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs, wonders, and miracles.”

Paul addresses his letter **to the churches of Galatia**. He also talks about the churches of Judea in Galatians 1:22. This expression “church of _____” is also used twice in Romans 16: Romans 16:4, 16. These various passages aren’t prescribing names for the church, such as Churches of Christ; they are descriptions of the Lord’s people. One might render these passages assemblies of Galatia, assemblies of Judea, assemblies of the Gentiles, and assemblies of the Anointed one, which is what Christ means. The church has no name besides Christian, regardless of what we put on a sign.

Galatians 1:3-5

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.

Jesus, Paul writes, is “**our Lord**.” By “our” he includes the Galatian Christians which were mostly, if not all, Gentiles. Paul often does this in the introduction to his epistles to bring both the Jews and the Gentiles into one body. The Gentiles, and the Jews to an extent, were being told that they weren’t real children of God because of their background.³

What comes next is a summary of the gospel: **who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age**. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:2, “For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” Jesus’s death and resurrection is the gospel in simple terms, no more and no less. It is the gospel that is God’s power for salvation for both Jews and Gentiles (Romans 1:16). There isn’t one gospel for the Jews and another for the Gentiles. To add to or to take away from the gospel is to say that it alone is sufficient to save.

What is meant by the expression “**this present evil age**?” The disciples asked Jesus for signs to let them know that the end of the age had drawn near (Matthew 24:3). The author of Hebrews talked about how the temple was a symbol for “the present time” (Hebrews 9:8-11). When the disciples asked their question about the end of the age, it was in response to Jesus saying that the temple was going to fall. Hebrews 9 and Matthew 24 seem to fit together to show us what age was meant: the age of the Law of Moses, the Old Covenant.⁴

³ Some Gentiles were doing the same to their Jewish brethren in the Roman church (Romans 11:1).

⁴ 1 Corinthians 10:10 and Hebrews 9:26 help shed more light on how the writers of the New Testament viewed the end of the age.

I won't take my time to explain this fully at this point, but hopefully as we go through Galatians, this understanding of **the present evil age** will make sense, especially considering the spiritual conflict between the Judaizers and the Gentile Christians.

Galatians 1:6-10—Another Gospel

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel, which is not just another account; but there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, even now I say again: if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! For am I now seeking the favor of people, or of God? Or am I striving to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.

Galatians 1:6

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel,

This is a good time to introduce some common themes we will see throughout this book: flesh versus Spirit, law versus liberty, and works versus grace. All of these are different ways of saying the same thing. **The gospel** in Galatians is simply the good news concerning Jesus, that He died for our sins and was resurrected three days later. This alone is what saves us. For the Judaizing teachers to add to this by demanding circumcision was considered an abomination as we will see in the following passages. Anytime we add works of righteousness to **the gospel** of Jesus, we are preaching **another gospel**.

Perhaps a quick way to see this is to ask what God told Abraham. Notice Paul's words in Galatians 3:

The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. (Galatians 3:8-9)

Notice that Abraham was not told about instrumental music, frequency of communion, or any of the things we typically think of when we reference Galatians 1 in a conversation with other believers about methods of worship, the structure of the church, etc. He simply told Abraham about Jesus, the Seed of Abraham. Ironically, in lumping all kinds of doctrine and preferences into the term "**gospel**" we are guilty of the very thing Paul is warning about in this text.

Paul also says in this verse that the Christians were **called by the grace of Christ**. This is simply another way to say that they were called by the gospel. It is the gospel of Christ that transforms our lives and saves us from our sins. One makes their calling and election sure by adding to their faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, etc. (2 Peter 1:5-10). But make no mistake, we are called through **the gospel**, justified by faith, and add to that faith as we mature in Christ.

Galatians 1:7

which is not just another account; but there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

The **gospel of Christ** is not compatible with meritorious or expiatory works. As Paul says in Romans 6:23, eternal life in Christ is a gift. There is nothing we can do to earn our salvation, and anyone who preaches the gospel + anything is teaching a false gospel. When we confuse doctrine (or teaching) and **gospel** (or preaching), we are bound to cause all kinds of divisions, sects, and disruptions of the unity that is inherent in **the gospel** message.

The Judaizers were **disturbing** the churches of Galatia. In Acts 17:8, 13 this word (*tarassō*) is used to describe what those from Judea were doing to “**stir**” up the crowds into persecuting the church. While Paul knew the general identity of the one who was causing them **trouble**, he did not know who it specifically was (Galatians 5:10). What we do know, however, is adding works to the **gospel of Christ disrupts** the body of Christ.

Galatians 1:8-9

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, even now I say again: if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!

Paul was so serious about not adding to the gospel of Jesus, that **he would not even give himself the liberty of changing its message**. This was so critical to him because Paul, as a Pharisee who was blameless according to the Law, knew the pitfalls of trusting in one’s own righteousness. It can lead to being exclusive, judgmental, and quite miserable. For Paul, as he talks about in Philippians 3, he counted all things loss of the glory and joy of knowing Christ. (Philippians 3:7-11).

His new life led him to have fellowship with his new Gentile brothers and sisters. In 2 Corinthians 11, he mentions that besides all the various trials he endured, the care of the churches was always on his mind. Since he gave up everything for Jesus and for the

ministry, for people that act like he used to act to come into the churches he helped establish and try to bring them under bondage was one of the most egregious evils he could imagine.

Galatians 1:10

For am I now seeking the favor of people, or of God? Or am I striving to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.

The proof of his freedom in Christ was in the bruises he bore on his body (Galatians 6:17). His apostleship didn't come from **seeking honor**; it came from giving up everything that he viewed as honorable. No longer would he look to himself for the source of honor and glory in his life; instead, he only looked to Christ.

It was his chief goal **to please God**, and for these Judaizers to trample on his ministry of the Law-free gospel was a slap in his face but it also was a rejection of the liberty offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus who saved him from the "present evil age." The Judaizers, from Paul's perspective, were trying to hold the church back under the old age that was swiftly coming to an end.

Galatians 1:11-24—The Origin of Paul's Apostleship

For I would have you know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel which was preached by me is not of human invention. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former way of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. But when He who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him for fifteen days. But I did not see another one of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which are in Christ; but they only kept hearing, "The man who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy." And they were glorifying God because of me.

Galatians 1:11-12

For I would have you know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel which was preached by me is not of human invention. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

The gospel Paul preached did not originate with him; it came directly from God through **a revelation of Jesus Christ.** In other words, his unwillingness to bind the Law on Gentile converts was in accordance with God's will. Those who were fighting against Paul were, like he once was, kicking against the goads (Acts 22:14).

Again, what is **the gospel Paul preached?** In verse 16 he says he was chosen to "preach Him." And in verses 22-23 Paul wrote that he preached "the faith." All of these are different ways of saying the same thing.

The message that Paul received from God was that he was to preach Jesus without forcing the Law upon the Gentiles and that their justification would come through faith, not works.

Galatians 1:13-14

For you have heard of my former way of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.

Paul was intimately familiar with what it meant to try and be justified by works. If anyone could do it, it would have been Paul. In another letter of his, he gives his credentials to those who were attempting to boast in the flesh:

...although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. (Philippians 3:4–6)

Yet, he went on to say that he counted all of this as loss for the sake of Christ. He understood that nobody could be justified by works because he himself was blameless when it came to righteousness which is in the Law. When he met Christ, he immediately recognized the liberty, peace, and joy that comes through faith.

Paul did so much damage when he persecuted the church. Thinking back on his career, he said that he was the worst sinner to ever live (1 Timothy 1:15). He considered himself to be both blameless and the foremost sinner at the same time. How can one reconcile those two statements? Because under a system of works, one justifies themselves, has their own righteousness, and ultimately serves themselves. Though **he excelled among his peers**, he was lost without Jesus.

The ancestral traditions Paul refers to includes more than just the Law. He is referring to **the oral traditions** which the Jews kept and the Pharisees bound on the people (Matthew 15:3). The Sermon on the Mount deals with many of these **traditions** where Jesus said, “You have heard that it’s been said...but I say...”

Two other notable instances of **the ancestral traditions** are found in Acts 10 and 1 Corinthians 14. In Acts 10, Peter was instructed to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. When he reached Cornelius’s house, he said, “You yourselves know that it is forbidden for a Jewish man to associate with or visit a foreigner” (Acts 10:28). Where did he get that? Not from the Law. It came from the oral traditions.

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul deals with several of the people’s arguments regarding their worship and use of their gifts. They argued, “The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves,

just as the Law also says” (1 Corinthians 14:34). Where does the Law say that? Miriam was a prophetess and so was Hulda, Diana, and others. This was an argument made from **oral tradition**. Paul had just said they could pray and prophesy as long as they were modest (1 Corinthians 11:5).

His response to their argument was simple:

Or was it from you that the word of God first went out? Or has it come to you only? If anyone thinks that he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But all things must be done properly and in an orderly way. (1 Corinthians 14:36–40).

Paul knew **the ancestral traditions** better than anyone, but he gave them up so that he might win Christ.

Galatians 1:15-17

But when He who had set me apart even from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.

Like Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5), Paul was **set apart from his mother’s womb**. If anyone was **called through His grace**, it was Paul. The dramatic entrance Jesus made into his life in Acts 9 is unparalleled in the New Testament. It is unparalleled in two ways: (1) the subject was utterly corrupt, actively working against God in persecuting the church, and was an active blasphemer while the other major conversion accounts were concerning those who were devout, such as Cornelius. And (2) Paul had a direct conversation with Jesus and was immediately affected by the bright light shining around him.

The focus of this passage, however, is not **Paul’s calling** but **the immediate action he took in travelling to Arabia**. His point throughout this entire section is that he was “not sent from men nor through human agency” (Galatians 1:1).

While there is no stated reason as to why Paul **went to Arabia**, it is interesting to note the only other occurrence of this word in Galatians and in the Bible: Galatians 4:24-25:

This is speaking allegorically, for these women are two covenants: one coming from Mount Sinai giving birth to children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is enslaved with her children.

Since Paul has already appealed to the book of Jeremiah to confirm his own prophetic office, and since Paul is dealing with the subject of the Law throughout the letter, it is possible, though not provable, that Paul travelled to **Arabia** to follow in the footsteps of Moses and receive instruction from God. This is in line with Paul's arguments concerning the origin of his ministry and his continual appeal to the fulfillment of the Old Covenant in the New throughout his epistles, such as in 2 Corinthians 3. Perhaps he had to see this mountain for himself after going through his own exodus.

Regardless, the point of this passage is to emphasize the origin of his ministry.

Galatians 1:18-21

Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him for fifteen days. But I did not see another one of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia.

Paul's apostleship was in question. One of the arguments they were using is that Paul arrived too late on the scene so must have been appointed by the apostles in Jerusalem. This would call into question Paul's authority as an apostle and cause some to doubt the legitimacy of his insistence that the Gentiles do not keep the Law. Instead, Paul outlines, in detail, where he went, who he saw, and how long he was there.

These details would apparently contradict some other story the Galatians had heard, and they would be able to cross reference them with news from Jerusalem.

Galatians 1:22-24

I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which are in Christ; but they only kept hearing, "The man who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy." And they were glorifying God because of me.

Paul again appeals to verifiable history. They could easily double check Paul's claims to apostleship. His point, again, is that his apostleship is in line with the other apostles in Jerusalem, but they both had the same direct source: God, not man.

Galatians 2:1-10—Recounting the Jerusalem Council

Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that somehow I might be running, or had run, in vain. But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. Yet it was a concern because of the false brothers secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy on our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to enslave us. But we did not yield in subjection to them, even for an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you. But from those who were of considerable repute (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no favoritism)—well, those who were of repute contributed nothing to me. But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised (for He who was at work for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised was at work for me also to the Gentiles), and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do.

Galatians 2:1

Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also.

It previously took Paul three years to reach **Jerusalem**, but even then, he was unknown to the Christians there (Galatians 1:18-24). So, after **a total of about seventeen years**, Paul finally made his first major trip to **Jerusalem**. The background and details of this trip can be found in Acts 15. The key thing to notice in this text is that **he took Titus**, a Gentile, with him.

Galatians 2:2

It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that somehow I might be running, or had run, in vain.

Paul **went up by revelation**. He was not called or commanded to go by an apostle or elder in Jerusalem. This is another way for him to emphasize the source of his apostleship and ministry.

The **gospel** here is the same **gospel** he defended in the previous chapter; it is the gospel of Christ plus nothing else, not even the Law. This was the occasion for the Jerusalem council. Some were opposed to the Gentiles entering the covenant community without being circumcised. Keep in mind Paul's conclusion concerning those who submit to circumcision: "And I testify again to every man who has himself circumcised, that he is obligated to keep the whole Law" (Galatians 5:3).

This council was more than just a debate about circumcision; it was an attempt to bring all Gentile Christians under the Law.

Galatians 2:3

But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.

The apostles saw no need to **circumcise Titus** just as they saw no need to **circumcise** Cornelius. An interesting case though is that of Timothy.

Now Paul also came to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brothers and sisters who were in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this man to leave with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. (Acts 16:1–3)

Paul refused to **circumcise Titus** "because of the Jews," so why was he willing to **circumcise** Timothy? Timothy was half Jewish. His mother should have had him **circumcised** at a young age but didn't.

This may seem confusing to us because we have always been taught that the Law went away at the Cross, but the divide between the two ages wasn't so clean. In Acts 21, for instance, Paul took another trip to Jerusalem where there were many believers who were zealous for the Law. Read the account:

And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard about them, they began glorifying God; and they said to him, "You see, brother, **how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the**

Law; and they have been told about you, **that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to abandon Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.** So what is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Therefore, do as we tell you: we have four men who have a vow upon themselves; take them along and purify yourself together with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and **then everyone will know that there is nothing to what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also conform, keeping the Law.** (Acts 21:18–24, emphasis mine—bold and underline)

Not only were there believers who kept the Law, but Paul went through a ritual to show that he did as well, even allowing a sacrifice to be made on his behalf (verse 26). Yet, when it came to his ministry to the Gentiles, he refused to make them keep even one aspect of the Law of the Law's sake.

Galatians 2:4

Yet it was a concern because of the false brothers secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy on our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to enslave us.

These false brothers were teaching, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). As Paul said in Galatians 1, they had been rescued from the “present evil age” by Jesus. For them to try and bring the Gentiles under the Law was to undo the Cross of Christ. Paul likens this to slavery, a theme he will lean on throughout the book.

Galatians 2:5

But we did not yield in subjection to them, even for an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you.

Again, one cannot help but ask if Paul **yielded to the Jews** in Acts 16 when he had Timothy circumcised. If the Law was nailed to the cross, then he was wrong because whoever is circumcised is bound to keep the whole Law. However, if there was a transition period between the Old and New Covenants, then Paul isn't inconsistent at all.

The **truth of the gospel** is the simplicity of the **gospel**. That is, it is the **gospel** plus nothing else. When keeping the Law himself, Paul understood a major distinction: he worked *from* the point of justification, not *to* the point of justification.

Galatians 2:6

But from those who were of considerable repute (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no favoritism) — well, those who were of repute contributed nothing to me.

God shows no favoritism, but man does, so Paul appealed to those in Jerusalem who had a good reputation among the people. Sometimes, preachers will quote from scholars, other ministers, or from some other source to give support to what they are saying. This does not mean that they find such sources authoritative, but that they find them useful in explaining their position. Paul appealed to the poets of the Athenians in Acts 17:28.

Galatians 2:7

But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised

Peter's main audience was descendants of Abraham. In his epistles, 1 and 2 Peter, Peter writes to the *diaspora*, that is, Jews who had been spread throughout the Roman empire. Paul's ministry, on the other hand, was to go "far away to the Gentiles" (Acts 22:21). This led to some competition between the disciples of these apostles, for in 1 Corinthians 1, some were saying "I am of Paul" and "I am of Cephas."

Galatians 2:8

(for He who was at work for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised was at work for me also to the Gentiles),

Despite the differences in their audience, they both worked for the same God. It was the same Spirit who led them to speak to those whom they did. This again establishes solidarity between both Paul and Peter and their respective ministries. The same gospel that was at work in Paul was at work in Peter.

Galatians 2:9

and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised.

Appealing to these names was crucial in establishing the legitimacy of his ministry. Despite the miracles Jesus performed, He had no earthly authority to appeal to, so many rejected Him. Since Paul was able to appeal to these apostles, elders, and

witnesses of Jesus, he could further convince these Gentiles that his ministry truly was from God.

Galatians 2:10

They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do.

At the end of the day, the only thing the Jerusalem church wanted from Paul was to be sure that he remembered the poor. The poor they had in mind here, I believe, were the poor disciples in Jerusalem who the church had already went to great lengths to care for through selling their land and professions. So, throughout his next few missionary trips, Paul took up a collection from among the Gentile believers (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). This act of benevolence further brought these two wings of the church closer together.

Galatians 2:11-21—Paul Confronts Peter

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of some men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and separate himself, fearing those from the circumcision. The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. 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? "We are Jews by nature and not sinners from the Gentiles; nevertheless, knowing that a person is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the Law; since by works of the Law no flesh will be justified. But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Far from it! For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a wrongdoer. For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly."

Galatians 2:11-12

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of some men from James, he

used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and separate himself, fearing those from the circumcision.

This is the only record of this interaction we have, so we do not know exactly when it took place, but Paul's point is quite clear: despite all the talk of Gentile inclusion, Peter was inconsistent in his application of his views out of fear "from the circumcision." Notice that this withdrawal was not simply to show hospitality towards the Jewish brethren; it was specifically out of fear of their view of him. We must not let the opinions of others affect our walk with God. Jesus regularly ate with sinners, tax collectors, and He touched lepers, and He received a lot of criticism for it.

Eating as a family was a major practice of the early church. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul condemns some who were being divisive during the congregational meal. It was a time where all could sit as equals, the poor could receive a good meal, and the entire church could enjoy fellowship with one another. For Peter to withdraw himself was to essentially say that the Gentile Christians were less than the Jewish Christians.

Galatians 2:13

The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.

Barnabas, the son of encouragement, was drawn away by their actions. This deeply disturbed Paul because not only was he Paul's travelling companion, he was also among the first to accept him into the church (Acts 9:26-27). Could this disagreement between Paul and Peter also be behind Paul and Barnabas's separation in Acts 15:35-41? Nothing in the text indicates such in Acts 15, but it is always a possibility that Galatians 2 provides background details to Acts like it did previously for the first half of Acts 15.

Galatians 2:14

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?"

The "truth of the gospel" is what Paul has defended so far and will take up the remainder of the book: the Gentiles are not bound to keep the Law in any shape, form, or fashion. To add anything to the gospel of Christ is to add a curse to oneself. Paul uses the word "truth" two other times: Galatians 2:5 and Galatians 5:7. The truth of the gospel, therefore, "is not merely doctrine but a social reality, a truth that must be embodied in

the practices of a community. This truth was being violated by the exclusionary practices of Peter and those who joined him in a policy of separate tables”⁵

When with the Gentile believers, Peter had no problem fellowshiping them with no stipulations. He had previously pointed out how it is against the Jewish tradition to eat with someone who was a Gentile (Acts 10:28). Although God had shown him that this prejudice was against His will, he was inconsistent in the application of it when in the presence of Jews who may not be so enlightened.

This section is the beginning of Paul’s response to Peter, and it extends to the end of the chapter.

Galatians 2:15

We are Jews by nature and not sinners from the Gentiles;

Paul is speaking ironically here in appealing to the Jewish tradition that the Gentiles were inherently sinful. Paul doesn’t believe this himself any longer. For example, in Romans 2, Paul argues that the Gentiles who do the things within the Law without having any revelation will be judged by “the Law written on their hearts” (Romans 2:15).

He is setting up an argument that’s like the one in Romans 1-2 where he puts the Jewish people on a pedestal to just knock them down again and conclude that all are under sin and in need of grace regardless of their lineage.

Galatians 2:16

nevertheless, knowing that a person is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the Law; since by works of the Law no flesh will be justified.

Despite the old views of who is a sinner and who isn’t based totally on nationality, Paul argues from the paradigm of justification by faith and not by works. His point is that no one has even been justified by the Law; it always comes through faith. No person will be justified by the works of the Law because it is impossible for anyone to work their way into the presence of God.

Paul’s emphasis of “even we” in this passage is to show that the Jews are equally justified by faith. Paul often uses the first-person plural pronoun to refer to “we the Jews” versus “you the Gentiles.” The context of each passage, of course, needs to be consulted when determining how Paul uses “we” and “you.”

⁵ Richard B. Hays, *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (2000). Page 235.

Galatians 2:17

But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Far from it!

Remember that “sinners” here is a reference to the Jewish perception of the Gentiles. Paul is saying, “If eating with Gentiles because of our joint justification in Christ makes us sinners, then so be it!” But Paul then counters with, “Does that make Christ the servant of sin?” He’s pointing out the problem with their view of the Gentiles: if Jesus dies to unify Jews and Gentiles into one body, then why should the Jewish Christians treat the Gentile believers differently, as if they need something else, for all of them were justified by their belief in Jesus.

Galatians 2:18

For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a wrongdoer.

If Paul were to rebuild the barrier between Jews and Gentiles through his actions, then it wouldn’t be the Gentiles that were sinners, it is Paul! He is no longer subject to those ancient traditions and ways of thinking. He has been liberated from the bondage he was once in, so why should he return to it?

Part of that liberation, you see, is being able to freely associate with all of God’s creatures regardless of their origin.

Galatians 2:19

For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live for God.

This expression “through the Law” has given many scholars trouble, and I admit it is not the easiest passage to understand. To offer up my thoughts, Paul is saying that the goal of the Law wasn’t the Law itself. For example, in Galatians 3, Paul argues that the Law was their guardian to bring them to Christ (Galatians 3:24). In Romans 10:4, Paul explains that Christ is the “end” or the “goal” of the Law. To paraphrase this passage, “The purpose of the Law was not to keep us under the Law forever, but to bring us to God. It’s goal, Christ, caused me to die to the Law and live to God.”

While it is hard to say exactly what Paul means by “through the Law,” that is not the focus of the passage: the point is that he died to the Law, and He died to the Law (and to sin) through the body of Jesus:

Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. (Romans 7:4).

By dying to the Law, he meant dying to the righteousness which comes through the Law (Galatians 2:21). Thus, he was no longer “under Law.” While he kept the various traditions and customs of the Moses, he no longer did them for the sake of obtaining his own righteousness, but he did it through his faith in Jesus.

Galatians 2:20

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

Through Paul’s crucifixion with Christ, he died to sin and was raised to righteousness (Romans 6:1-11). But who’s righteousness counts? Under the law, Paul was “found blameless” as to that righteousness (Philippians 3:6). If he was found blameless, why did he need any more righteousness? Because the righteousness which came through the Law cannot justify.

So, who’s righteousness counts? It’s the righteousness of God and of His Christ. Thus, Paul explained, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.”

Paul then adds a curious statement: “and the life which I now live in the flesh...” In Galatians the expression “the flesh” often refers to life and righteousness under the Law. In other words, though Paul keeps the Law, as he demonstrated through his actions in Acts 21, he does so by faith in the Son of God. That is, he puts his trust in Jesus’s faithfulness and righteousness in that He gave Himself up for Paul and all of us.

Galatians 2:21

I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.”

Paul concludes his critique of Peter with appealing once more to his life in Judaism. If anyone had righteousness which comes through the Law, it was Paul, but this did not justify, so he says that if the Law was sufficient in bringing individuals to God, then Christ had no need to die.

Keep in mind here the original point he made concerning the Gentiles being “sinners” in verse 15. One could easily substitute the word “clean” for righteousness and “unclean” for sinners. What Paul is in effect saying is that the Law could not make one ceremonially clean enough to enter the presence of God. In that regard, they were just as guilty as the Gentiles. It is Jesus who can bring one into the presence of God, and thus lies the beauty and the liberty of the New Covenant.

May we not nullify the grace of God through chasing after our own righteousness.

Galatians 3-5:12—Polemic

Galatians 3:1-14—Faith Brings Righteousness

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain — if indeed it was in vain? So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the nations will be blessed in you.” So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.” Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, “The righteous man shall live by faith.” However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, “He who practices them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”— in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith

Galatians 5:13-6:18—Encouragement