

Galatians 2:11-20

Psalm 77

Luke 9:51-62

### Hypocrisy, or death

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Paul puts a fairly stark choice to the church in Galatia: it is either hypocrisy or death.

The theme of hypocrisy comes up because Paul has had a problem with Peter (or “Cephas” in our reading morning) in Antioch. After he has recounted the way in which he had gone to Jerusalem and put his proclamation of the gospel before those who preceded him as apostles, to test that he wasn’t “running in vain”, Paul now finds that Peter – while originally being happy as a Christian Jew to join in table fellowship with Gentile Christians – subsequently withdraws from that fellowship when others come from Jerusalem whose expectation is that male Gentile Christians would be circumcised, taking on the mark of the covenant God made with Israel.

When we speak about hypocrisy, we tend to have in mind a very strong moral sense of the term: a person who seems to say one thing and yet acts another way. In the best of cases it is a matter of self-delusion: a person who can’t see that her actions and her words don’t cohere. In the worst case scenarios, it is a matter of deliberate deception: a person saying one thing and doing another, perhaps as an exercise of power over others.

But that *moral* sense of hypocrisy doesn’t really apply to Peter or to Barnabas, and certainly not to those who came from Jerusalem to Antioch. This kind of hypocrisy is *distraction from the heart of the matter*.

In the case of the “Judaizers” – those who were trying to make Jewish the Gentile Christians – that distraction from the heart of the matter took the form of treating faith in Christ as an item which has to be added to a list of things we do in order to stand right before God. They had been Jews from birth; they had come to Christian faith and have understood that they have “added” this faith to their Jewishness. And they look at the Gentile church and say, Well, they’ve got Christ, and now they need to add to that the mark of the covenant – treating faith in Christ as a matter of an item on a list. Later on in Galatians Paul adds other items he’s heard the Galatians think matter: the observation of certain days or seasons or celebrations, and so on.

To this kind of hypocrisy – distraction from what is truly the heart of the matter – Paul says a very strong No! He says, theologically, that Jesus is not just one more thing to add to yourself in order to be whole before God. The second thing he says – or implies – is an anthropological or human consequence: you are not the sum of things you have acquired. In this letter and in others Paul gives an account of the things that he himself had acquired. Born of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; circumcised on the eighth day; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the law a Pharisee and faultless. He says of these things, I consider them all *crap* – a very strong word in the Greek! – I consider them all absolute rubbish compared to the value of knowing Jesus.

Our lives as individuals and as a community are very much a matter of acquisition. I acquire language, an education; I develop relationships, I take on a vocation, I have a family, earn money, I gather possessions, reputation and influence. And I do each of these things (assuming that I am free to do them) because I think that they are the right things to do. And so it is very easy then to imagine myself as righteous because of the *way* I’ve added those things and because of the thing I *have* added.

As a community we go through the same kind of process. Last week many of us gathered to consider the things we value in our life as Mark the Evangelist – the things we'd like to see carried over into whatever our future might be. We talked about location, aesthetics, worship, theology, mission and evangelism. These are things we imagine we need to retain or acquire in order to be a church – and they're very important. But we ought not to imagine that our being as a church is the sum of all those things – that our standing before God is now secured because we can tick all the boxes on "the list".

Paul says, You are not the sum of all the things you have acquired. And he doesn't mean that therefore you should have *less*; he doesn't mean that you should have *different* things. What he says you have to do to unhook yourself from your acquisitions is, *die*: "I died to the law" – I died to the lists – "I have been crucified with Christ." The metaphor of death is perhaps the only one which is really going to work for Paul here. He is talking about grace, and one thing about the dead is that they haven't *got* anything – they're *dead*. "You can't take it with you", conventional wisdom says; it is very important theological wisdom as well. The dead don't *have* anything, and you can't *add* anything to them either; they cannot *acquire* anything. You can't add anything to the dead.

But what Paul says happens is that, whether we literally or metaphorically dead – God *adds us* to Christ. "I have died to the lists; I have been crucified with Christ" and so "It is now longer who live but Christ who lives in me". I haven't added Christ as one more thing I have to have; I have been added to Christ.

Christian faith is an exercise in death and resurrection, an exercise in dying and being added to the life of Christ.

Our lives are processes of acquisition. This is part of what it means to be an historical being: we accumulate things. But the important thing here is that these acquisitions are merely what give us shape and contour, making us the individuals and communities that we are. The difficult thing is to acquire but not to evaluate ourselves by what we have – to have and, at the same time, *not* to have. It is extraordinarily difficult, for we choose what we do because we consider them to be the *right* choices, and we would want to say to God and to those around us, I chose the *right* things.

But Paul says, *you* are added to *Christ*; he is not added to you.

This is difficult, which is why we have the book of Galatians. Distraction from the heart of the matter is difficult to avoid. And because it is difficult we practice it each week. We gather around this table. We come and receive. We eat and we drink. But unlike most other food, we are not adding to ourselves in that eating and drinking. Rather we are being added to Christ. As we eat and drink we are made part of the Body of Christ; we are grafted onto that Body. Around this table we receive (Augustine says) what we are, in order to become what we receive: the Body of Christ. To learn what that means – what it means to be added to Christ – would be to get to the heart of the matter, without hypocrisy.

And so it ought to be our prayer that, as we hear and repent, as we eat and drink, as we are added to the Body and then are sent as food for a hungry world, God might continue to teach us who are as we are added to the Son, and so how we are to be with each other, and before God.                   Amen.

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(Slightly edited transcript from recording)