

## Galatians 2:1-10

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should

go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we're celebrating the feast of two great saints, Peter and Paul. In today's epistle, you can see why we're celebrating them. These guys are leaders in the Church: Peter is spearheading the mission to the Jews, Paul is reaching out to the Gentiles, and God is working through both of them. Things are going great. But if we keep reading a bit, things stop looking so good. Starting with verse 11:

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

This doesn't look like the Church that witnessed the resurrected Christ. This looks like the worst church voter's meeting in history. And Peter doesn't look like a great saint, he looks like a great sinner.

Peter gets it dead wrong here. Paul says that he stands condemned. This isn't a matter of the church budget, this is a matter of salvation, a matter of the very identity of Christianity: Is the Gospel for everyone, or is it not? Is Christianity just another sect of Judaism, or is it a world-changing truth? As a leader in the Church, Peter has to stand up and tell everyone the truth. But Peter's answer to these questions falls short. He might know in his heart that the Gospel is for everyone, Jews and Gentiles, but he doesn't show it with his actions. Like he did in the courtyard on Good Friday, when Peter is faced with the tough questions, he backs down. He capitulates. He gives in to fear. And he betrays Jesus.

Now in this passage, Paul gets it right. He calls Peter out, and he leads the Church back in the right direction. But Paul isn't innocent either, by no means! Our first introduction to Paul is in Acts chapter 7. As you know, Paul is referred to as Saul, and Saul has blood on his hands:

But [Stephen], full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed

together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Paul isn't just a great sinner; in his own words, he's the greatest of sinners. 1

Timothy 1:15: "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."

Notice that Paul doesn't say he was the foremost, he says he is the foremost. Even though Paul has stopped persecuting the Church, even though he is a baptized

Christian, he is still a great sinner. Paul's words again from Romans 7:15: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

**And doesn't this sound like us?** Even though we're baptized Christians, we keep sinning, again, and again, and again. And doesn't it make it worse, in a way, that we should know better? I think this is why Paul says "I am the greatest sinner" and not "I was." It's one thing to sin because you don't know any better. But it's another to know the right thing to do, but still do the wrong thing. When Christians sin, they rebel against God in a way that an unbeliever never could.

Think about it this way: which hurts you more? If your enemy hurts you, or if your friend hurts you? Christ calls us his friends, and yet we sin against him anyway.

**Let's go back to Peter.** On Good Friday, Peter hurts Jesus in a way that the Jewish leaders and the Roman soldiers don't. The Jewish leaders consider Jesus their enemy, so it's really no surprise that they try to kill him. And the soldiers are doing what they're told. Jesus even says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." But Peter knows what he's doing. Peter has walked alongside Jesus for years, he has confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God. And despite this, despite the fact that Peter knows Jesus is his friend, his Lord, and his God, Peter disowns Jesus. He's worse than an enemy, he's a traitor.

**And it's the same way with us.** We know the law of God, the Ten Commandments, we know what we're supposed to do and not do. We know that God is a righteous God, and he does not tolerate sin. We know the mercy of God,

that he loves us enough to die for us. And yet, we still reject him. We're worse than enemies, we're traitors. Like Peter, like Paul, we are all great sinners.

This fact reminds me of a quote from John Newton, an Anglican preacher and the author of the hymn "Amazing Grace." Many of you have probably heard this quote before. Near the end of his life, Newton said "Although my memory is fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great savior." Well, we know that we're great sinners. So how great a savior is Christ? This is how great a savior Christ is: He doesn't stop at saving his friends. He doesn't even stop at saving his enemies. He even saves traitors. Now that is unheard of mercy. Throughout history, in nearly every nation, treason is a crime worthy of death. You just don't keep around someone that betrays you.

But Jesus does. Peter is a traitor, he disowns Jesus at a crucial moment. But what does Jesus do? In John chapter 21, we see Jesus confront Peter for the first time after the crucifixion:

Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third

time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.”

(This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”

Follow me. With those words, Jesus re-extends that first offer of discipleship to Peter. He welcomes him back with open arms. Instead of rejecting Peter, Jesus forgives him.

Jesus forgives Peter, and Jesus forgives Paul. Paul himself admits that he is the greatest of sinners. Returning to 1 Timothy 1, “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But,” Paul says, “I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.” If Jesus can forgive Paul, Jesus can forgive anyone. And that means Jesus can forgive you.

He forgave us when we were his enemies, he forgives us now even when we still rebel against him. Like he did for Peter and Paul, Jesus welcomes us back with open arms. We are great sinners, it’s true. But Jesus is an even greater savior.

And because Jesus is such a great savior, we don't have to stop at being great sinners. **We, like Peter and Paul, can become great saints.** We are great sinners, but Jesus is a great savior. And because Jesus is a great savior, we can be great saints.

So what does it mean to be a saint? Whenever Paul uses the word "saint" in his letters, he just uses it to refer to faithful Christians. And the word "saint" itself just means "holy ones," those who have been made holy by God. So by the ordinary use of the word, we are all saints, believers in Christ who are trying to live out holy lives by the help of the Holy Spirit.

Now this definition of "saint" raises another question: what does "living out a holy life" look like? And in this case, it can be helpful to differentiate between saints and saints. There are certain people whom we celebrate especially as saints because they are shining examples of faith and holy living. We can see this in our Scripture reading from Acts. **Starting at verse 7,**

"And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are

you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.”

Here we see Peter proclaiming the true Gospel, even against opposition, and Paul recounting the good works God has accomplished through him. We celebrate them as saints because they are examples of boldly confessing the faith, and doing the good works God has prepared for them. In short, because what they do points to Christ.

Because in the end, being a saint isn't about what you do, it's about what Christ has done for you, by forgiving your sins, and what he does through you, by making you one of his saints. We are great sinners, yes, but Jesus is a great savior, because of which we can be great saints.

Now may the peace of God that passes all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.