

**When Paul Rebuked Peter
(Grace Has Replaced Law)
Galatians 2:11-21
John Hepp, Jr.**

This happened when Simon Peter, the #1 church leader, visited the Gentile church at Antioch of Syria. The text is quoted in short sections from the New International Version (but see footnotes), each followed by an explanation and a summary.

2:11-13 Peter's hypocrisy prompts Paul's rebuke.

¹¹ When Peter¹ came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. ¹² Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. ¹³ The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

By his actions at Antioch Peter prompted Paul's rebuke. Peter knew that the law was no longer valid, which had created a wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles (see Acts 10). Therefore, Peter at first ate with the Gentiles (Gal. 2:11-12a). Later, however, he withdrew from them in fear of some men of the circumcision party who came "from James" (i.e., from Jerusalem, v. 12b). By not giving his real reason for withdrawing, Peter implied that God required it—that the law was still valid. His example drew the other Jews, even Barnabas, into the same hypocrisy (v. 13).

Summary: On a visit to Antioch Peter lived with Gentile Christians until some Jewish Christians came from Jerusalem. In fear of them he—followed by other Jews—withdrew as though the law were still valid and Gentiles were still unclean.

2:14 Peter has acted as though lawkeeping must be added to grace.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

¹ "Peter" is not a translation but Greek *Petros* written in English, as in Gal. 2:7, 8. In 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14, the original does not even have *Petros* but its equivalent in Aramaic, *Kephas*. *Kephas* is the name Jesus promised to Simon (John 1:42) and later gave him (Matt. 16:18). Both terms mean "rock."

Because Peter's example contradicted the gospel, Paul publicly rebuked him as follows. Until now you have been living like Gentiles, not under the law. Now, however, you withdraw from them. By doing so, you make it look as though Gentiles cannot please God without keeping the law.

Summary: Peter has been living like a Gentile, but now by his actions makes Gentiles think they must keep the Jewish law.

2:15-16 Having only one way of justification makes us all “sinners.”

¹⁵ “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ ¹⁶ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Messiah.² So we, too, have put our faith in Messiah Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Messiah and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

All our lives we Jews have not classified ourselves with “Gentile sinners” (who do not keep God's holy law). But now that the Messiah Jesus has come, we have finally understood that obeying the law cannot make us right with God. The only thing that can do that is believing in Messiah, which we have done.

Summary: Jews, because they had the law, did not consider themselves “Gentile sinners.” The gospel, however, taught them to get right with God by faith in Messiah. Those who did so forsook the law.

2:17-18 Rebuilding the law slanders Messiah.

¹⁷ “If, while we seek to be justified in Messiah, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Messiah promotes sin? Absolutely not!

¹⁸ If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker.

17 So in obedience to the gospel we forsook the law to believe in Messiah. That has put us into the category of sinners the same as the Gentiles. Shall we conclude, then, that Messiah actually serves the interests of (favors and facilitates) sin?³ Of course not.

18. Yet, that is what I imply if I (like you) rebuild the wall of separation Messiah made me tear down.⁴ Rebuilding it implies that tearing it down was wrong.

² NIV has “Christ,” not a translation but Greek *Cristos* written in English. Wherever *Cristos* is used, I have put Aramaic *Messiah*, which retains some of the royal meaning. Both titles mean “Anointed [as King],” John 1:41.

³ The Greek at the end of 2:17 says, “So then, is Messiah a servant of sin?”

⁴ Note the following about 2:18, a key verse. (1) It gives a reason why one might conclude, as the question implies in v. 17, that Messiah serves the interests of sin. The second word in Greek (but omitted in the NIV) is *gar*,

Summary: It was Messiah, then, who made Jews “sinners” by making them tear down the wall separating Jews from Gentiles. By doing that, did He promote sin? If I rebuild the wall, I imply that He did.

2:19-21 Do not cancel God’s grace by adding law.

¹⁹“For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. ²⁰I have been crucified with Messiah and I no longer live, but Messiah lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Messiah died for nothing!”

19. In what way did I tear down the law?⁵ By letting it kill me so that I could live for God. 20. Yes, it killed me when it killed Messiah.⁶ His only reason to let that happen was that He loved me and wanted to save me. Now I have a new life, not my own but His resurrection life in me. 21. This is God’s own plan to produce a new and holy life. If I try to become acceptable to God through law keeping, I reject God’s plan. I act as though there were no reason for Messiah to die.

Summary: The law exacted all its penalty on Messiah when He died. In Him I also died—and rose with Him to new life. Therefore, the law has done its worst and has no more power over me. To go back to the law in order to please God would make Messiah’s death mean nothing.

Run, John, run, the law commands
But gives us neither feet nor hands.
Far better news the gospel brings;
It bids us fly and gives us wings.

John Bunyan

which usually introduces a reason (or explanation) for something just said. Here, rebuilding the law barrier implies that Messiah was wrong when He made me tear it down. (2) Rebuilding the law does not **make** me a “law-breaker” but **demonstrates** that I became one by tearing it down. The verb translated “proves” (*sunistano*) means “demonstrates” an existing condition, not “makes” a new condition. (3) The noun translated “law-breaker” (*parabaten*) means “transgressor, sinner” without specifically referring to the law. In several passages it is accompanied by the word for “law” (e.g., Romans 2:25, 27), but not here. (4) When Paul says “if I rebuild...I...I,” he supposes himself doing what Cephas did. This helps him bridge into the following statements (vv. 19-21), which are true of every believer.

⁵ As in verse 18, *gar* in verse 19 shows that verses 19-20 include an explanation of something just said.

⁶ How and why the law killed Messiah will be explained in 3:13-14; 4:4-5; 5:24; and 6:14. My union with Him in dying to the law and living to God is the main idea in Romans 7:1-6.