

A hunter raised his rifle and took careful aim at a large bear. When he was about to pull the trigger, the bear spoke in a soft, soothing voice, "Isn't it better to talk than shoot? What do you want? Let us negotiate the matter." Lowering his rifle, the hunter replied, "I want a fur coat." "Good," said the bear, "that is a negotiable. I only want a full stomach. Let's compromise." They sat down to talk, and after a time the bear walked away alone. The negotiations had been successful. The bear had a full stomach, and the hunter had his fur coat.

Compromise is not always a good thing is it? While that seems to be the case when hunting bears it's definitely true when it comes to the gospel. While God wants us Christians to be peacemakers, he does not want us to attain "peace" through the compromise of his Word. This morning the Apostle Paul reminds us how God wants us to stand firm in the truth of the gospel - even though that truth may sound incredible, and even when standing firm makes us feel uncomfortable.

As we heard a couple of weeks ago, the Apostle Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia because false teachers, called Judaizers, had infiltrated their ranks. The Judaizers taught that salvation came to those who believed in Jesus and kept the Old Testament Ceremonial Law. This false teaching is quite common for it is not in our nature to believe that salvation is absolutely free. If there isn't such thing as a free lunch, many reason, why should heaven be free? And if salvation is free, why did God insist that the people of the Old Testament do things like keep the Sabbath and offer animal sacrifices? Didn't they earn salvation by keeping these laws? Hardly! Paul says in our text, "We who are Jews by birth... 16 know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified" (Gal. 2:15, 16).

Old Testament people were saved just as we are, by believing in the promise of a savior, not by keeping the law. What then is the purpose of the law if not to tell us how to get to heaven? Paul explains in his letter to the Romans: "no one will be declared righteous in [God's] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin" (Rom. 3:20). The law is a mirror. It shows how we have not kept God's demands and therefore look quite filthy to God. Take the Fourth Commandment for example. When God tells me to honor my father and mother he's demanding that I do more than obey them. God wants me to do what they say without grumbling and complaining. How often hasn't this commandment been out of place in our lives?

While the mirror of the law shows us what we really look like, it doesn't do anything to help us improve our appearance. A bad-hair-day doesn't turn into a good-hair-day just by standing in front of the mirror. How then are we saved if the law doesn't help us do what God wants us to do? We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus. That simply means we are saved because Jesus saved us. It's like being lost in a jungle with no hope of survival. Amazingly someone parachutes down to where we are and volunteers to hike out and come back with help. To save us our rescuer must first himself make it out of the jungle alive. To do this he will have to avoid every quicksand trap, every snake, and poisonous spider. Then he will have to do more than return with a map and the offer to lead us out. Such an offer wouldn't do us any good because we wouldn't have the strength to follow our rescuer to safety. Our rescuer must return with a helicopter to airlift us out. How do you think you would feel upon seeing that chopper touch down? Would you run to it eager to get out of the jungle and go home? You would think so but spiritually speaking we would not run to the helicopter. Instead we would stay glued to our spot unable (Eph. 2:1) and unwilling (Rom. 8:7) to climb into the helicopter. If we are going to make it out of the jungle, our rescuer must carry us into that chopper. That's the truth of the

gospel. It says that Jesus not only won our salvation without our help and gives it to us for free; it tells us that Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit who causes us to believe this truth. From beginning to end God is the cause of our salvation. As we remember from Ephesians 2:8-9, By grace you have been saved thru faith, and that not of your own, it is a gift of God, not works, lest any man should boast.”

The truth of the gospel still sounds too incredible to many today. That’s why false teachers continue to insist that what Jesus did is not enough. One such church body claims that we still have to keep the Sabbath Day. Another teaches that we must do acts of penance to finish paying for our sins. Still another says that we must be born again by making a decision for Christ. It claims that if we have not done so, then we are not saved.. Insisting, however, that there is some part we must play in our salvation is like saying that those lost in the jungle must first pay for their flight before they can board the rescue helicopter. Friends, stand firm in the truth of the gospel. Your salvation is accomplished. Your salvation is free. Don’t listen to those who say otherwise and would thereby put your faith, even your salvation, in jeopardy.

Paul was so certain about the truth of the gospel that he was willing to stand firm in it even when life became uncomfortable as a result of it. That happened when the Apostle Peter came to visit the church Paul was working at in Syrian Antioch. When Peter first arrived he freely associated with the Gentile Christians. If he was over at a Gentile’s house for dinner, and they were serving up Lobster and Shrimp, Peter would eat the meal with them. The Old Testament dietary laws no longer applied to New Testament Christians. You could eat a BLT sandwich if you wanted too. Soon after Peter’s arrival, however, Jews came from the church in Jerusalem. These Jews were Judaizers. They believed that to get to heaven, you had to believe in Jesus and follow ceremonial laws, such as eating kosher food, and being circumcised. When Peter saw these Jews he was worried about what they would report to the Judaizers about his actions. Because Peter did not want the “hassle” of explaining to the Judaizers his Christian freedom to associate with the Gentiles and to eat their food, he stopped hanging out with them. By withdrawing from their fellowship, Peter implied that Gentiles could not be “real” Christians until they too were circumcised and ate kosher foods. Peter’s action set off an avalanche as the other Jews in Antioch, including Paul’s mission partner Barnabas, joined Peter in refraining from associating with the Gentiles.

Fear still motivates a lot of our actions today doesn’t it? Why, for example, is it that we are uncomfortable with our views on LGBTQ, abortion, the practice of closed communion, or the teaching about the role of men and women? We are uncomfortable because we’re afraid of what others will think of us. Friends, mark well what happened when Peter gave into his fear. He led others astray and he ended up denying the truth of the gospel even though he didn’t mean to. And he did that all without speaking a word. In the same way if our friends are talking about spiritual issues that are clearly contrary to God’s Word, if we remain silent, it is giving them the impression that we approve or have no problem with their thinking. We run the risk of denying Jesus and leading them astray. Let me illustrate. No one wants to ring the doorbell of their neighbor at 5:00 A.M. on a Saturday. But if his house was on fire, and you let him sleep, you are not just loveless and careless. You are a killer. You could have saved his life. In the same way, God has dropped on us the heavy message of being a watchman for our brother. God has given us this job because of his grace and desire for the salvation of all mankind. God wants us to speak up. The responsibility of waking our neighbor asleep in a burning house becomes a joyful privilege when he emerges safely from the smoke.

Will it be easy to confront our brother or sister in the faith? No. We will end up in some

uncomfortable situations but so what? It's God's Word. It's the truth. It's worth standing up for.

Paul not only refused to join Peter in his hypocrisy, he actually confronted Peter about what he was doing. Can you imagine how Paul felt about doing this? Peter was the spokesman of the Twelve Disciples. Paul, on the other hand, was a former persecutor of the church. Who was he to say anything? If Paul felt uncomfortable, he didn't let it stop him from confronting Peter in front of the others. Shouldn't Paul have talked to Peter in private, however? No. Peter had committed a public offence and had led others astray. Everyone needed to hear what Paul had to say to Peter (1 Tim. 5:20). Anyway Paul's purpose in confronting Peter was not to prove him wrong; his purpose was to bring Peter back in line with the gospel. His concern was for souls. Paul spoke the truth in love and God wants us to do the same to the straying in our midst.

Although Paul doesn't tell us the rest of the story we assume that Peter listened to his rebuke for in his second epistle Peter referred to Paul as a friend (2 Pet. 3:15 ff.). That is an encouragement for us today too – that when a Christian friend speaks to us the truth of God's Word in love, let's heed their godly criticism. Let's not ignore them because we've made up our mind to do what we are going to do. Take to heart these words of wise King Solomon: "Like an earring of gold...is a wise man's rebuke to a listening ear" (Prov. 25:12).

You may have chuckled at how the bear got the best of the hunter in opening story of this devotion but it's no laughing matter when Satan gets the best of Christians through the compromise of God's Word. To compromise God's Word is to chip away at the one foundation that gives us hope and strength in this world. Don't do that, friends. Stand firm in the truth of the gospel for it is our stay and strength no matter what discomforts we may have to face because of it. Amen.