

Email Subject: Understand What's At Stake!

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Galatians 2:11-21 (Pentecost 16)

Dear Christian,

God told the prophet Ezekiel, "I have appointed you to be a watchman for the house of Israel." (33:7). Jesus said, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his sin just between the two of you." (Matthew 18:15) Jesus may not have said those things to me, but they apply to me. My name is Paul. I am best known as the "missionary to the Gentiles" or non-Jews. You probably have heard about my three great mission journeys all over the world spreading the good news of Jesus as our Savior, but that doesn't mean I didn't also have the responsibility of being a watchman watching over my brothers.

When I say brothers, let it be clearly known that I don't just mean a man who shares the same parents as I do. Who are my brothers? They are my blood relatives. They are men and women who are my friends and my neighbors. They are even fellow believers who I may know very well and am really close to. They are even fellow believers that I do not know very well or even just barely know. Yet God has given me and he has given you the responsibility of being a watchman over your brothers showing them their sin and warning them of sin's danger.

Being a watchman watching over your brothers warning of sin that you see is often difficult. But it seems especially difficult when you see it in people you are close to - people you love and care about deeply. When you see them doing something wrong, something that isn't God pleasing, something sinful that they just don't see, it can be hard to confront them. The mere thought of approaching them creates an awkward and uncomfortable situation. You don't want them to be mad at you. You don't want to mess up the relationship you have with them because you love them that much. So you make excuses. You tell yourself that it's only one sin. You tell yourself that you wait and see if they realize what they have done wrong themselves. You tell yourself that it isn't your job to show them what they are doing wrong. So the easy road of silence is often taken to "keep the peace" avoiding that situation all together.

When dealing with sin watching over your brother, the way of love is not silence. The way of love is speaking. It's fulfilling your job of being a watchman with a loving warning of the danger. You do it not because you know you are right or because you think you're so much better. You speak and warn because you understand what's at stake. When someone is stuck in ignorant, persistent, uncorrected sin, eternity is at stake.

Let me tell you about a time when I had to have that uncomfortable confronting conversation with someone close to me, someone who might surprise you - Peter (also known as Cephas). Peter and I were not just fellow apostles sent out by Christ himself, we were also brothers in the faith. You could say that he was my friend. Peter had many strong qualities that were great blessings as he carried out the task Jesus called him to do - fish for people and feed his sheep. However you also might know Peter had some tendencies that caused some problems. At times he tended to be impulsive and his actions sometimes lacked real thought behind them.

When Peter came to Antioch between my first and second missionary journey, I saw him do something that was clearly wrong. Maybe it was an impulsive knee-jerk reaction which lacked thought, but when I saw what was happening as a result of his actions, I understood eternity was at stake, maybe not necessarily for

him, but for others around him. I had to speak up and oppose him, but I didn't talk to others behind his back about what Peter was doing. That would be gossiping. I pointed out the wrongness of his actions to his face, directly to him in the hearing of those led astray by his actions. So what was Peter doing that needed correcting? It had to do with all things with his eating habits.

The church in Antioch was a mixed congregation. There were both Jews and Gentiles, circumcised and uncircumcised. These Christians understood that no human work was necessary for salvation. So no special emphasis was placed on the observance or non-observance of Old Testament Jewish customs like circumcision or what was eaten. If Jewish Christians preferred to eat kosher food at the fellowship meals, that was fine. Or if they wished to enjoy a pork dish with their Gentile fellow Christians, that was fine too. Peter used to do this. He associated with the Gentile Christians and ate with them all the time not strictly observing traditional Jewish patterns as those things now fell into the category of Christian freedom to do or not do. That was before some other Jewish Christians came to Antioch from James who was the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

James wasn't the problem, but these people held to a false understanding about those eating customs. These newcomers to Antioch continued to insist that those Old Testament practices of circumcision and eating customs needed to be done as if salvation was dependent upon them too. In their insistence they were burdening the conscience of those Gentiles with things which had already been clearly declared to be Christian liberty. So because Peter was afraid of what these people were going to think or say, he impulsively reacted without thinking. He stopped eating with the Gentile Christians. He separated himself from them at the common meals and ate only kosher once again with these Jewish Christians who kept to themselves.

His actions didn't go unnoticed. What Peter did strengthened the false thinking of these Jews from Jerusalem who were upholding the Law as something needed to be done to be saved. It led other Jewish Christians in Antioch to follow Peter's lead. Even Barnabas, my brother in the faith and travelling companion on my first missionary journey, followed Peter's lead. His actions led Gentiles whom he had previously eaten with to be confused. Their consciences became burdened because they weren't circumcised and they weren't eating like the Jews. As a result they could only conclude that the Jewish way was better or the only right way. Eternity was now at stake all because of this hypocrisy.

A hypocrite is someone who says all the right things, but their actions don't reflect those words. They say actions speak louder than words. How true it is! Peter proclaimed that forgiveness and salvation are only through Jesus and not by anything you do. Circumcision and God's command to avoid certain foods were now only a custom that could be followed or not. Peter spoke the truth of the Gospel and demonstrated it by eating with the Gentiles in Antioch, but his actions fearing some Jews no longer spoke the Gospel. They weren't in line with the truth as he was joining with false teaching forcing the Gentiles to live like the Jews. So I called him out in front of everyone on his hypocrisy. Yes, Peter was wrong, but everyone needed to be set straight and burdened consciences eased. "If you, a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, why do you compel the Gentiles to live like the Jews?" (vs. 14)

With the truth of the Gospel blurred, eternity was at stake. Once again people were looking to their own works to contribute in some way to their salvation. Upholding the Old Testament traditions as Law is the real sin. It spoils the Gospel. It robs men of the free gift of salvation since it is no longer by faith in Jesus. Then his death means nothing. As I wrote to the Christians in Galatia who were dealing with similar issues about about circumcision, I recounted this time when I had to point out and correct my brother, Peter, as uncomfortable as

it may have been. I knew eternal salvation only through Jesus and not by anything we did was at stake. I wrote to the Galatians:

We know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. So we also believed in Christ Jesus that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves were also found to be sinners, then is Christ a servant of sin? Certainly not! In fact, if I build up again those things that I destroyed, I bring on myself the judgment of being a lawbreaker. Indeed, through the law I died to the law that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I am now living in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not regard the grace of God as nothing. As a matter of fact, if righteousness is through the law, then Christ died for nothing! (2:16-21)

As my brother, I loved him and cared about him too much to let this slide as if I didn't see anything. As a watchman, I was watching over not just Peter. Because Peter's actions had wide reaching consequences, I was watching over the rest of my brothers and sisters in the faith too so that the truth of the Gospel was not just proclaimed, but lived there in Antioch for the eternal benefit of all the believers there.

Understanding that eternity is at stake when you see sin in your brother's life, like a watchman, you show that sin and warn them of that sin's danger. That is never going to be easy. It can be awkward and hard. Starting that conversation may be one of the hardest things you have to do. It may cause them to be angry at you for pointing out something you see is wrong. Nobody likes to be shown they are clearly wrong and doing something that is sinful. Yet aren't you showing love to them? No matter how uncomfortable or hard it might be to broach the subject, dear Christian, keep watch over your brothers pointing out directly to them what is clearly wrong out of loving concern for their salvation. Love is not silent. It speaks the truth in love no matter how hard it might be understanding what's at stake. When it comes to sin eternity is at stake.

When they have been shown wrong and realize it, continue to watch over them by encouraging them with the truth of the Gospel. The sinner is justified, declared not guilty of sin, not by doing works of penance to make up for what they have done, but through faith in Jesus and what he has done. As their sins are placed upon his cross, they are crucified with Christ with the result that their life is lived by faith in the Son of God who loved them and gave himself for them. Then having won them over, that awkward discomfort is gone and your love for them is clearly seen as you have brought an erring brother to find forgiveness in the love of Christ. That is reason to rejoice!

Your fellow watchman and brother in Christ,

Paul



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