

Homiletics Analysis: Galatians 2

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Galatians 2 moves through two defining episodes in Paul's apostolic biography, each of which presses toward the same theological crisis. The chapter opens with Paul's Jerusalem consultation (vv. 1–10), where he submitted his gospel to the pillar apostles — James, Peter, and John — and received their full affirmation with no additions or corrections. This was not a subordination of Paul's authority but a demonstration of its independence: the apostles in Jerusalem *added nothing* to Paul's message. The unity they extended was unity in the same gospel, and the only supplementary charge they gave was to remember the poor — something Paul was eager to do. The second episode (vv. 11–21) is the Antioch confrontation, where Paul publicly opposed Peter to his face because Peter's behavior stood in direct contradiction to the gospel he proclaimed. When certain men came from James, Peter withdrew from table fellowship with Gentile believers out of fear of those who insisted on circumcision. His hypocrisy was contagious — Barnabas was swept along — and the effect was a practical denial that Jew and Gentile stand equally before God on the same terms. Paul's public rebuke then becomes the vehicle for the chapter's theological climax: justification is by faith in Christ alone, not by the works of the law (vv. 15–21). The chapter closes with its most explosive statement — if righteousness could come through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish two closely related effects through this chapter. First, He is defending the integrity and independence of the gospel — showing that it is not derivative from, dependent on, or improvable by any human authority, including the most respected apostles. Second, He is confronting every form of behavioral contradiction with the gospel's logic — showing that the moment we act as though standing before God depends on anything other than Christ, we are not merely making a doctrinal error but are practically nullifying grace. Paul's biography is not the point; the gospel is. And the gospel is not merely being explained here — it is being defended as the only possible ground on which God can justify anyone. The intent is to create in the reader both theological clarity (what justification *is*) and behavioral alarm (what it looks like when our actions deny what our mouths confess).

Subject Sentence: The gospel of justification by faith alone stands independent of all human authority and cannot be behaviorally compromised without practical apostasy.

Primary Claim: God is asserting through Paul’s confrontation with Peter that the gospel of grace is not merely a true doctrine but a logic that must govern conduct — and that any behavior implying a different basis for standing before God, however sincere or socially pressured, is a betrayal of the cross.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature of Paul’s Jerusalem visit (vv. 1–10)

A recurring interpretive question is whether Paul’s visit in verses 1–10 is the same as the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 or an earlier private visit. Some take it as the famine relief visit of Acts 11:30, others as the Acts 15 council. The identification matters for dating and for understanding the scope of Paul’s authority claim. The Reformed reading, following most exegetical scholarship, notes that regardless of the precise historical identification, Paul’s *theological* point is unambiguous: he presented his gospel to the most authoritative figures in Jerusalem, they affirmed it, and they added *nothing*. The gospel Paul preaches is not a regional variant or a personal opinion — it is the gospel. Whether this is Acts 11 or Acts 15 does not alter that claim. The Lutheran tradition has emphasized this independence strongly, and rightly so. Where some evangelical interpreters have tried to soften Paul’s insistence on independence (making him seem to require Jerusalem ratification), the text pushes back firmly: he presented his gospel privately *to those of reputation*, but their reputation added nothing to his gospel’s validity.

The Antioch incident — Peter’s guilt and the nature of the error (vv. 11–14)

Some interpreters, particularly within the Roman Catholic tradition historically and some irenic evangelical traditions today, have softened this episode — reading Peter’s withdrawal as a matter of pastoral prudence rather than genuine theological betrayal. John Chrysostom famously argued that Peter’s withdrawal was deliberate and Peter and Paul had a prearranged plan to provide Paul an occasion to teach. This reading must be **refuted**: Paul says Peter “stood condemned” (v. 11) and “was acting hypocritically” (v. 13). The language of condemnation and hypocrisy does not describe a staged teaching moment — it describes genuine sin with genuine theological consequences. The Wesleyan/Arminian tradition has sometimes handled this episode primarily as an ethics lesson about social courage and not caving to peer pressure. That is a real application, but if it is the *primary* frame, it functionally avoids the deeper issue: Peter was not merely being cowardly — he was acting *in contradiction to the gospel’s logic*. The Reformed reading insists the issue is not Peter’s character but the gospel’s integrity.

Justification by faith — the meaning of “works of the law” (vv. 15–21)

The New Perspective on Paul (NPP), represented by E.P. Sanders, James Dunn, and N.T. Wright, argues that “works of the law” in this context refers specifically to Jewish boundary

markers — circumcision, food laws, calendar observance — that functioned as ethnic-identity markers rather than as moral merit before God. On this reading, Paul is not opposing a system of earning God’s favor through moral performance but opposing ethnic nationalism using law as a social boundary. This reading must be **qualified**: it is correct that the immediate context is ethnic table fellowship, and the social dimension of “works of the law” is real in this passage. Dunn’s instinct that Paul is attacking boundary markers is partially supported by the narrative context. However, the NPP’s restriction of “works of the law” to social boundary markers is ultimately too narrow. Verse 16 states that “by works of the law *no one will be justified*” — a universal statement that goes beyond ethnic boundary markers to the entire category of law-keeping as a ground of justification. Verse 21 — “if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose” — is not a statement about ethnic identity but about the entire law’s inability to produce righteousness. The Reformed reading **acknowledges** that the NPP has helpfully recovered the social and ecclesiological dimension of Paul’s argument (table fellowship is not a trivial detail — it is a visible enactment of the gospel) while insisting that the Reformational reading of justification as forensic, individual, and excluding all moral performance as ground of standing remains the controlling framework. The NPP’s social contribution enriches; its restriction of “works of the law” to boundary markers diminishes.

“I have been crucified with Christ” (v. 20)

Some Wesleyan, Keswick, and Higher Life traditions have read verse 20 primarily as a sanctification text — the death of self as a pathway to Spirit-filled living. The verse does have sanctification implications, and those should not be ignored. However, in context, verse 20 is a **justification** text before it is a sanctification text. Paul’s point is that the ego that sought righteousness through law-keeping has died — what lives now is Christ living in and for the believer. The life Paul lives is by faith in the Son of God who loved him and gave Himself for him. This is not first a call to moral self-death for holiness but a declaration that the self that sought to stand before God on its own terms has been put to death by the cross. The sanctification application is real but secondary. To make it primary is to lose the argumentative force of the entire passage.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 15:6** — “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” The foundational Old Testament text for justification by faith, which Paul will deploy explicitly in Galatians 3. This passage establishes that the principle of faith-righteousness precedes the law by centuries, grounding Paul’s argument that works of law never were the basis of standing before God.
- **Habakkuk 2:4** — “The righteous shall live by faith.” The prophetic anchor for Paul’s argument throughout Galatians and Romans — that even within the Old Testament economy, the operative principle for life before God was always faith, not law-keeping.

- **Romans 3:21–26** — Paul’s full forensic statement of justification: the righteousness of God has been revealed apart from the law, through faith in Jesus Christ, for all who believe. Romans 3 is the doctrinal exposition of what Galatians 2 defends narratively and polemically.
- **Philippians 3:4–11** — Paul’s autobiography of renouncing all law-based credentials as rubbish in order to gain Christ and the righteousness that comes through faith. The same personal logic as Galatians 2:20 — the self that boasted in legal status has died.
- **John 17:20–23** — Christ’s high-priestly prayer for the unity of believers across all divisions. Peter’s table withdrawal fractured the visible unity of Jew and Gentile that the gospel creates. John 17 shows the theological weight of that fracture — it was an assault on the unity for which Christ prayed.

Aim: To show that the gospel of justification by faith alone is not merely true doctrine but governing logic — a logic that controls not only what we believe but how we behave, eat, associate, and treat those with whom we share the table of Christ.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Paul travels to Jerusalem again, by revelation, and lays his gospel before the pillar apostles in private	The private setting is deliberate — not seeking approval but ensuring clarity before public conflict
3	Titus, a Greek, was not compelled to be circumcised	A concrete test case: the pillar apostles did not require circumcision even of an uncircumcised Gentile
4–5	False brothers infiltrated to spy out Gentile freedom in Christ; Paul refused to yield even for a moment	The gospel’s freedom is not a negotiable concession — any compromise surrenders “the truth of the gospel”
6	Those of high reputation added nothing to Paul’s gospel	Apostolic authority is real but not additive — Paul’s gospel was already complete
7–9	James, Peter, and John recognized Paul’s apostleship and gave the	The division of labor (circumcised/uncircumcised) is missional, not doctrinal

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	right hand of fellowship	— one gospel, two fields
10	The only request: remember the poor — something Paul was eager to do	Unity expressed in shared care for the poor; the gospel creates practical solidarity
11	Peter came to Antioch; Paul opposed him to his face because he stood condemned	The confrontation is public and apostolic — not a personality clash but a theological collision
12	Before certain men from James arrived, Peter ate with Gentiles; afterward he withdrew out of fear	The trigger is social pressure from the circumcision party — Peter's behavior is fear-driven, not conviction-driven
13	The rest of the Jews joined in the hypocrisy; even Barnabas was led astray	Hypocrisy is contagious — the social pressure of the circumcision party was reshaping the entire community
14	Paul rebukes Peter publicly: "If you live like a Gentile, why do you compel Gentiles to live like Jews?"	The contradiction is exposed: Peter's own lifestyle (before witnesses came) testified against his new behavior
15–16	Even Jewish believers know justification is by faith in Christ, not works of the law — for no one is justified by works of the law	The theological conclusion drawn from the table conflict: the ground of standing before God is singular and universal
17	If seeking justification in Christ means we are found to be sinners, is Christ a servant of sin? Absolutely not.	Anticipating an objection: Paul's gospel of freedom does not make Christ complicit in sin
18	If I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself a lawbreaker	To return to law as ground of justification is not merely unnecessary — it is self-condemnation
19	Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God	The law itself, by condemning, drives the believer to Christ and away from the law as ground of

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
20	I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me	standing The gospel's most personal and compact statement: union with Christ replaces the law-keeping self as the operative basis of life before God
21	I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose	The chapter's explosive conclusion: any addition to grace as the ground of justification functionally empties the cross

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–10	The Gospel's Independence: Affirmed by the Pillar Apostles
2	11–14	The Gospel's Integrity: Defended Against Peter at Antioch
3	15–21	The Gospel's Logic: Justification by Faith Alone, or Christ Died for Nothing

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The gospel of justification by faith alone stands independent of all human authority and cannot be behaviorally compromised without practical apostasy.

Primary Claim: God is asserting through Paul's confrontation with Peter that the gospel of grace is not merely a true doctrine but a logic that must govern conduct — and that any behavior implying a different basis for standing before God, however sincere or socially pressured, is a betrayal of the cross.

Applications (Five)

1. When social pressure causes you to behave as though your acceptance depends on your religious credentials or group membership, you are not just being inconsistent — you are acting out a false gospel. Peter was not an evil man. He was a man who believed the gospel with his mind and then allowed fear to reroute his behavior. The result was that his actions preached a different message from his convictions. Every time a Christian performs a more orthodox, more culturally appropriate, more impressive version of themselves for an audience of religious peers — eating with some and withdrawing from others based on who is watching — they are rehearsing Peter's sin. The question is not whether you believe justification by faith alone; the question is whether your daily social calculations are being driven by that belief or by fear. (*Affections/worship*)

2. Stop rebuilding the structures of self-justification that the gospel tore down. Verse 18 is precise: the person who rebuilds what they once tore down proves themselves a lawbreaker. This has a concrete form in contemporary Christian life. It is the person who was liberated from performance-based approval but has quietly reconstructed an elaborate internal scorecard — spiritual disciplines completed, sins catalogued and managed, standing before God measured by recent moral performance. The gospel did not install a different kind of law-keeping; it ended law-keeping as a ground of standing before God. When you wake in the morning measuring whether you are acceptable to God based on yesterday's performance, you are rebuilding. The cross already tore that down. (*Mind/belief*)

3. Recognize that the identity-marker pressures of your particular Christian subculture are capable of functioning exactly as circumcision did — as social boundary markers that make gospel unity practically impossible. The men from James brought a set of cultural-religious markers that created a two-tier community. Contemporary Christian communities do the same with different markers: political alignment, schooling choices, worship style, theological vocabulary, social class. When those markers function to create a fellowship in which some are more fully welcomed than others, the table fellowship of the gospel has been fractured. Paul's rebuke of Peter was not about hurt feelings — it was about the visible enactment of the gospel's logic in how people eat together. Who is welcome at your table, and on what basis? (*Will/behavior*)

4. Let the personal force of verse 20 land where it is aimed — at you, not as a doctrinal statement but as a declaration of whose life you are actually living. "The Son of God who loved *me* and gave himself for *me*." Paul insists on the first person singular here when he could have written "us." The gospel is not merely a system of true propositions about justification — it is the reality that a Person loved you specifically, gave Himself for you specifically, and now lives in you specifically. Theological clarity about justification that never becomes personal devotion to the One who justified you is not yet the full work of this passage. The claim here is not just that faith justifies — it is that the one who justifies is a Person worth trusting with your entire life, because He already gave His entire life for yours. (*Affections/worship*)

5. Where you hold authority or influence in the Christian community, exercise it in a way that adds nothing to the gospel rather than implying that belonging requires more than Christ. Paul establishes in verses 1–10 that even the most eminent apostles added nothing to the gospel. The pillar apostles’ legitimate authority expressed itself in *affirmation* of what God had already done, not in *addition* to it. Every pastor, elder, parent, small group leader, and ministry director holds influence over whether those in their care feel that belonging requires something beyond Christ. The question for those with authority is not whether they are adding explicit requirements — it is whether the culture they create, the approval they give and withhold, and the expectations they communicate imply that full standing requires something more than grace through faith. The pillar apostles extended the right hand of fellowship. Follow them. (*Will/behavior*)

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Galatians 2 establishes that justification by faith is not a Pauline invention, a Lutheran refinement, or a product of polemical circumstance — it is the singular, universal, and exclusive ground on which God declares sinners righteous. The chapter demonstrates that no human authority, however eminent, can add to or alter the gospel; and that the gospel is not merely a theological position but a logic that must govern the entire structure of Christian life and community. God’s grace in Christ is not one component of standing before Him — it is the whole of it. Verse 21 makes this absolute: if anything else contributes to righteousness, the cross is emptied of meaning. The theological force of the chapter is not merely that works-righteousness is wrong but that it is an assault on the sufficiency of Christ’s death.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This chapter is one of the primary Reformation battlegrounds for good reason. The Reformed tradition has insisted, against all additive schemes of justification, that *sola fide* is not a slogan but the logical entailment of the gospel. If righteousness comes through the law — in any form, to any degree — then Christ died unnecessarily. Galatians 2:21 is not hyperbole; it is a logical consequence. The Reformed tradition’s insistence on forensic justification, monergistic grace, and the alien righteousness of Christ received by faith alone finds its Pauline charter here. The Antioch incident further demonstrates that the Reformed concern is not abstract — every Christian community is capable of Peter’s sin, and the pastoral task is not merely to preach the doctrine of justification but to create communities whose table fellowship visibly enacts it. Sanctification, as verse 20 shows, flows from union with the crucified and risen Christ — not from law-keeping but from the life of the One who lives in the justified sinner. This is grace not merely received but inhabited.

Main Takeaway

Christ died for you — all of you, completely, finally, sufficiently. The moment you add anything to that — your religious performance, your group membership, your spiritual credentials, your moral scorekeeping — you are not supplementing the gospel; you are nullifying it. And when your behavior implies that some people need more than Christ to be fully welcome at the table, you are preaching that nullification with your life. The gospel is not a foundation on which you build — it is a logic by which you live.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating Galatians 2 primarily as a biography of Paul’s authority rather than a defense of the gospel’s integrity.** The apostolic biography in verses 1–10 is not the sermon’s subject — it is the vehicle by which Paul establishes that the gospel he preaches is not a human invention. Preachers who spend the majority of their time on the Jerusalem meeting as a historical episode will miss what Paul is doing: demonstrating that the gospel’s validity is independent of all human endorsement, including the most impressive ecclesiastical endorsement imaginable. The biography exists to serve the theology.
- **Softening the Antioch confrontation into a lesson about interpersonal courage or conflict resolution.** Peter’s sin was not primarily that he lacked backbone — it was that his behavior enacted a denial of the gospel. Preaching this episode as “sometimes we need to confront our friends” domesticates the passage and loses its theological nerve. The issue is whether the cross is sufficient. Everything else is downstream of that.
- **Applying verse 20 exclusively as a sanctification text (“dying to self”) while bypassing its justification context.** “I have been crucified with Christ” is first a statement about the death of the self that sought righteousness through law-keeping, not primarily a call to experiential self-denial. The Keswick and Higher Life traditions have generated enormous devotional application from verse 20, some of it genuinely useful, but where it bypasses the justification argument entirely, it has lifted a verse out of its load-bearing function in Paul’s argument. Preach the sanctification application if the passage warrants it — but only after anchoring it in the justification context that generates it.
- **Preaching “works of the law” exclusively as moral self-effort while missing the social and ecclesiological dimension Paul’s argument requires.** The NPP’s best contribution is this: table fellowship is not incidental to Paul’s argument — it is the concrete form the doctrinal dispute takes in this chapter. A sermon that explains justification by faith in purely individual and cognitive terms without addressing what it means for how Christians eat together, who is welcome at the table, and

what social markers create or fracture community has missed half of what the passage is driving at. The doctrine must land ecclesiologically, not only personally.

- **Failing to preach the logic of verse 21 with its full explosive force.** “Christ died for no purpose” is one of the most devastating sentences in the New Testament if you allow it to land. Any scheme in which human performance, religious status, or group identity contributes to standing before God functionally renders the cross unnecessary. Preachers who are worried about antinomianism sometimes blunt verse 21 by immediately qualifying it with calls to obedience. Let it land first. The cross is either sufficient or it is not. Paul says it is — which means everything else is.
- **Importing the Jerusalem pillar apostles’ authority as a model for contemporary ecclesiastical structures without noting Paul’s point is precisely the opposite.** Paul’s use of the Jerusalem apostles is not to establish their authority over him but to demonstrate their *agreement* with him — and, in Peter’s case, to demonstrate that even the most eminent apostle is accountable to the gospel’s logic. Using this passage to buttress church hierarchy or apostolic authority structures inverts Paul’s argument entirely.