

From Simon to Peter #34 - the Holy Spirit and Reaction to Criticism

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon explores how a Spirit-filled man reacts to valid criticism, using the example of Peter's lapse into folly and Paul's courageous intervention.

Duration: 41:02

Scripture: Galatians 2:11

Topics: "Simon to Peter"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses Peter's attitude towards valid criticism from Paul. The sermon emphasizes the importance of honesty as a key to spiritual reality and maturity. The speaker describes Peter as a dedicated disciple of Jesus, even willing to face execution for his loyalty. The sermon also highlights the concept of walking a straight and narrow path when embracing Christ and his gospel.

Transcript

Would you like to turn with me this morning to the Galatian epistle in chapter 2? I would like to read again a short passage that begins with verse 11. This will be our final study in the series on Peter, which we have entitled From Simon to Peter. And it may be that some of us will feel that this is a strange episode with which to conclude.

I can only say that this is the biographical episode with which the Scriptures appears to conclude, and therefore I can offer no apology. I'd like to read a passage that begins with verse 11 in chapter 2. But when Peter was come to Antioch, I, that is Paul, I withstood him face to face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles.

But when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. Or as another translation puts it, fearing them of the circumcision party. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him, in so much that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation.

But when I saw that they walked not uprightly, according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews? Now the reasoning of Paul goes on and proceeds, but I think that we have in that verse, in verse 14, the pith of his reasoning and of his argument. The title we have given to

this last study is this, How a Spirit-filled Man Reacts to Valid Criticism. You will remember that our last view of Peter was of a resolute, dedicated disciple of our Lord's, prepared almost to do anything for his master.

He was chained in the Jerusalem prison. Chained, of course, because of his loyalty to Christ. Chained to two of the sixteen soldiers that had been deputed to look after him the night before what was supposed to be his execution.

And there he was asleep, dare I say it, like a baby. Asleep as a baby. Almost careless of the kind of thing that had been arranged for him the next day, namely his execution.

And it was all because, of course, God's will was his will. And he knew that whatever the morrow held, God held him. And in that he found peace and hope and wonderful.

He found sleep. He found rest. Now, the human writers of scripture might very well have been tempted to end the biographical sketches of Peter's life at that point.

If you were writing the life of Peter, I've no doubt you would say, right, we've reached the high water mark. For the third time over, Peter is in prison and is prepared to face anything that comes his way for the sake of his Lord. That's the capstone.

That's the last chapter. Let's write, finished. But the divine author of scripture, in contradistinction to the human writers, thought otherwise.

And let's remember, the writers of scripture are not the authors of scripture. Though we speak of the gospel of John or the gospel of Matthew or the gospel of what have you, or the epistle of so and so, they were writers. They were God's pen men.

We must never distinguish between the writers of scripture and the author of scripture. I say the divine author of scripture, the Holy Spirit, deemed otherwise. And he would have this last episode put on record.

And it is one in which Peter does not appear in such a bright light. Great man that he was, great man. And we are not worthy to draw near to him in one sense.

We are not looking down at Peter over our proud noses. Not on your life. Peter was a leader among the men.

Peter was God chosen. Peter was spirit filled. Peter was the apostle that God had chosen to the Jews.

Peter was all that we've said he was in the will and in the purpose of God. But nevertheless, the last biographical sketch of Peter to be recorded in Holy Writ is of an entirely different order from that we considered last time. Here, he who was there unafraid of the very jaws of death is afraid of a little pressure group from Jerusalem.

There were pressure groups in those days as there are pressure groups today. And there was a circumcision party, a little pressure group that had come down from Jerusalem to Antioch to see that Peter told the lie. And Peter was bullied.

And Peter was frightened. And Peter gave in. And in the words of the authorized version, he dissembled.

He acted, let us say it because the Bible says it, hypocritically. I'll come to that a little later on. Now the whole episode can be divided into three main statements.

First of all, we have here a record of a lapse into folly. Peter's lapse into folly. In coming to that, we've got to note something that goes before it, namely Peter's initial charity.

Look at the first part of verse 12. For before that certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles. Arriving at Syria's chiefest city, Antioch, the apostle Peter not only made for the Christian community there, but he joined the Gentile and Jewish community, probably first of all at the table of our Lord, or at least at some stage.

And then he ate with them at their table. In other words, he had what we commonly speak of as table fellowship with the saints. Whether they were Jews, whether they were Gentiles, it made no difference.

They were one in Christ. Peter was glad to meet them, and he rejoiced with them, and he ate with them. Of course, this is as natural as it was necessary for a man like Peter.

I say necessary for this reason. Peter had been taught the lesson that whom God cleanses must not be called common. There are no second-grade citizens in the kingdom of our God.

Color of skin or nationality doesn't mean that much. Within the kingdom of our Lord and the church of his Son, whom God cleanses, God cleanses. And I have no right to treat a man whom God cleanses as other than made white in the blood of the Lamb.

Neither did Peter. Peter's first few days among the Antiochian Christians, therefore, were days of unrestricted Christian fellowship and Christian joy. Can you see it? The chiefest apostle to the Jews, mingling with Jew and with Gentile, eating at their tables, joining with them at the Lord's table, and everything in the garden is lovely.

Peter's initial charity, but notice Peter's eventual change. But, says verse 12, are these terrible buts? Are there many buts in your life and mine? So and so and so and so but. And I'm very sorry to say it gives me no sense of joy, no glee.

I have no glee in my spirit today to have to point you to this but in the life of Peter at this point especially. But when they came, that is the people who are ostensibly coming from James, the brother of our Lord, he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. I'm reading from the Revised Standard Version.

Peter's change of stance coincided then with the arrival from Jerusalem of a group who claimed at least that they had some special relation to James, brother of our Lord. The text is uncertain at this point. We don't know whether they meant to say that James had sent them.

We're not quite sure that they even meant to say that they were doing what they did or saying as they did on the authority of James. We don't know. But apparently they put the emphasis on this, they'd come from James and James was the leader of the Jerusalem church.

The reference to them as the circumcision party however, lets us know exactly what they stood for. They were ultra-conservative. Ultra-conservative that is in matters of theology and continued to give to circumcision a value and significance which was a veritable denial of the gospel.

They would deem it preposterous for Peter to have tabled fellowship with uncircumcised Gentiles. And Peter became ensnared. Now we'll go into this in a moment.

We'll enlarge upon it a little. The only thing I want to say now in relation to Peter's eventual change is this. This does not mean that Peter ceased to believe the gospel of the grace of God that the one thing you need to be saved is to know Jesus as your savior, to repent of your sin and to trust in Christ.

It doesn't mean that he denied that. What it does mean is this. That he acted as if he no longer believed like that.

The whole thrust is that he became hypocritical in his behavior. He behaved as if he believed that a circumcised man has got something to commend him that an uncircumcised man has not. He acted as if he believed that for a man to be circumcised then he belongs to the elite in the church of Jesus Christ.

That's not so. That takes away from the glory and the sufficiency of the Lord Jesus. And even the great apostle Peter at this advanced stage in his life and career behaved in such a manner as to cast a cloud over the gospel.

And he withdrew from table fellowship with a Gentile Christian. True, the tense of the verbs here, without going into details, but the tense of the verbs here do suggest that he did so gradually. Listen, he didn't do it all at once.

He didn't say, look, all right, that's the end of it. I'm not having anything more to do with you. He did it gradually, but he did it.

He withdrew. Now that pathetically unjustifiable step was fraught with gravest peril. I can only refer to them.

First of all, think of the pain, think of the tragedy, think of the heart soreness caused to those Gentile believers gathered into the church who've repented of their sin, who have Christ as their treasure and their savior and yet an apostle of Jesus Christ comes and now withdraws from them and does not eat with them. Think of the tragedy of it. Go a step further.

We see that this drove a wedge between two of the best friends in the New Testament, Paul and Barnabas. Because Paul could not have it. Paul saw through the whole thing.

He saw the significance of it straight away and says, Paul, this is wrong. Barnabas didn't see quite as clearly or he was not quite as courageous. And so you have a cleavage between the great apostle Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles and one of his very best friends in the work of the Lord, Barnabas.

But more than that, I say to you that the church stood poised precariously on the edge of a precipice. This could well have been the demise of the church as we have come to know it. For had Peter not been reprimanded and his sin exposed and the thing righted, then the church would have been forever divided into parties, Jew and Gentile.

And the unity of the body of Christ would have been dismembered. And a thing of the past. A lapse into folly.

A second point, an example of fidelity. We turn now from Peter to Paul. At this strategic hour in its history, the church was saved from almost inevitable disaster by the courageous intervention and the discerning

insight of but one man.

Now if I had an hour at my disposal, I would like to go through some of the periods of history and say how over and over and over again this kind of thing has taken place. God has had one man, just one man. It's no wonder that Moody said, God only needs one man.

Luther so long stood alone. John Calvin stood alone. John Knox in Scotland stood alone.

And so one could go on. And in most of the countries of the world, some of the greatest things have been accomplished by one man alone with God. God and his one man.

And so it is today. There are individuals, lonely in some cases, very lonely, but they're standing alone. And they're the key to a situation that will transform the course of history.

Armed with a razor-like mind, the Apostle Paul was trained to think things through. And inspired by an almost unrivaled love for his Lord, he took the cudgels up and he decided something's got to happen. I don't care for consequences.

Principles are more important than consequences. Now look first at Paul's challenge. Irrespective of the consequences that might accrue to himself on that score, Paul challenged Peter, and this is how he reports what happened.

Can I read it again? But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned, verse 11, then verse 14. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas, before them all, If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile, that is, no longer attending to the dietary laws of the Jews and things like that, you've come to live very much like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you now compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? Now that is a challenge that is directly related to principle. I want to stress that.

It is not a clash of personalities that we have here. In so many of the books one reads, one would have to understand that here we have a clash of personalities. My friends, read the book for yourselves.

This is not a matter of one temperament over against another or of one personality over against another. This is a matter of principle. And one of the men in the case could see the principle clearly, and the other had blinds over his face.

He was blinded. It isn't that Paul was out for a fight. He wasn't.

Though he has already acknowledged Peter to be one of the pillars of the Jerusalem church, chapter 2, verse 9, principle must come before personality, and a silent acquiescence in Peter's behavior was out of the question for Paul. Principle is more important than peace. Principle is more important than personality.

And so, you notice, in two ways Paul approached this. First of all, he spoke apparently to Peter face to face, right up to his face, not shouting at him from a distance, not talking behind his back, but he goes up to him face to face, face to face. And then secondly, in the presence of them all, a scandal has been caused.

The Gentile Christians have been scandalized and treated as second-class citizens. Well, you can't treat this thing in a corner. This is to be openly tackled and openly rectified.

And Paul could see that. If the rift is to be healed, the thing has got to be healed in the open. Thank God for a pause.

He courageously raises his voice in protest, Paul's challenge. But now look at Paul's charge. Be it noted that Paul does not content himself with a mere general sort of a challenge to Peter, a general protest.

In other words, he was not simply concerned to ease his own conscience in the matter. See, if Paul had been simply concerned to ease his own conscience and to say, I've got to say something about this. Well, he might have said it in a general sort of a way.

No, no, no, no, no. Paul couldn't do that. He couldn't be content with that.

He could see clearly what the thing was leading to. He could see the next step. He could see the development of this kind of thing in the church.

He could see the future of the church split in two. And so it does not suffice to deal in generalities. He's got to come right down to brass tacks and put his finger on the very issues.

Now you notice there are two things to be stressed here. Paul challenged Peter and all who had joined with him with acting, I quote from the RSV translation, insincerely. Verse 13, And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity.

Now, a little earlier on I used the word hypocrisy. The word underlying the English insincerely and insincerity is the word for hypocrisy. I have every sympathy with the translators of the Bible because perhaps they didn't want to give it its full force at this point.

Perhaps they didn't want to suggest that Peter was acting as a hypocrite at least in the full-blooded sense of that term. And perhaps he wasn't. But that's what the word is.

The word employed there means hypocrisy, hypocrisy. Vincent's comment is straightforward and illuminating and needs no further comment. He puts it like this, Their act was hypocrisy because it was a concealment of their own liberal convictions and an open profession of still adhering to the narrow Pharisaic view.

Peter did not mean to elevate circumcision as something that was necessary for Christian fellowship. He didn't mean to do that. He couldn't do that and be a Christian.

A Christian is a man that says, Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling. I don't bring my circumcision and put it down here on the balances and say, Now here's a little bit of my merit. I'm circumcised.

The eighth day of the stock of Israel of the tribe of Benjamin or anything else. Nothing is necessary for salvation but Christ and Christ only. Let me say that to someone here this morning perhaps who doesn't know the realities of the Christian faith and of Christian grace.

My friend, there is only one thing you need and that thing is a person. It is Jesus Christ in your heart. It is the Christ who died for you on the cross in your heart by the Holy Spirit.

Nothing else, nothing else. One thing is necessary and that one thing is Christ in the heart. Now, Peter did not mean, if you questioned him, to elevate circumcision and to say, All right, even though you only need

Christ for salvation, you need Christ and circumcision to have fellowship.

He didn't mean that, but he acted as if he did. He knew that circumcision was not necessary for salvation, therefore it is not necessary for fellowship. But he is acting, let me repeat, as if he did believe circumcision to be thus important.

That is to say, at least, a form of hypocrisy. When we consciously behave in a manner that belies our belief, we behave hypocritically. That was Paul's first charge against Peter.

Before we go any further, can I ask you to face yourself as I try to face myself here? Do we do this kind of thing? Do we who so earnestly contend for the gospel as revealed in Christ sometimes act as if something more than participation in Christ were necessary for fellowship? Oh, I'll come right down to brass tacks. Unless a man is baptized in a certain way, can't have real fellowship with him. Not real fellowship.

Or unless a man has been episcopally confirmed after his baptism and that in a special kind of building, consecrated building. Can't have real fellowship with that man. Or whisper it not in gasp.

Unless a man speaks in tongues. Can't have real fellowship. Not real.

Only second class. You can go so far but no further. My friend, it's the old Galatian heresy dressed up.

Anything you put which you deem in your estimate to be greater than Christ and to supplement Christ and to be necessary for fellowship, I say to you that takes away from Christ and the gospel. That was the Galatian heresy. The second aspect of Paul's charge is this.

Paul enlarges upon that basic charge by saying that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel. Verse 14. As a matter of fact, that word for straightforward may well be translated straight-footed.

That's far more literal. Straight-footed. There's a picture here.

The idea is that once you embrace Christ and his gospel, there is a straight and a narrow path that opens up before you. Let me repeat. The moment you put your arms of faith around the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, that moment there is a straight path and a narrow path that opens up before you.

And Jesus calls you to walk that way. Not the course of this world. I am the way.

Right. What these people were doing was this. They were not walking straight-footed.

In other words, they were turning their feet a little bit off the straight, and they were going either just a little bit to the left or a little bit to the right. In this case, in our terminology, it would be a little bit to the right. And you cannot do it and maintain real fellowship with God and his people.

You've got to go straight on to the end of the road. They were not straight-footed. Paul charged Peter then with turning off at a tangent and moving off the course that the Lord Jesus had led down.

This is not in the gospel. This is inconsistent with it. It's not walking straight on.

Such was the challenge, and such was the charge, leveled by the Apostle Paul against his fellow Apostle Peter. The perusal of the unfortunate incident may depress some of us. If I were to leave just here this morning, you know, I can understand it being depressing.

But Peter, and Peter at this point, Peter an apostle, the apostle to the Jews, that Peter should do this kind of thing. But wait a moment. There's a redeeming feature here.

And if I don't have time to expound it, let me just say it. One of the most wonderful things that comes out of this whole dismal episode is Peter's attitude to the criticism that was made of him by Paul. Peter's attitude to the criticism that was leveled at him by Paul.

And that's why I gave the title to this message this morning, How a Spirit-filled Man Reacts to Valid Criticism. Now my good friends, I don't normally do this, but I think it's getting on for twenty past twelve. I'm very sorry.

And if somebody has to go, I quite understand. I'll only be about four minutes, but will you give me four minutes? If anybody is unwilling, I'll understand it if you have to go. But I feel I must say this for the glory of the gospel and of the truth.

And so my third main point is this. The honesty that is a key to spiritual reality and maturity. The honesty that is a key to spiritual reality and spiritual maturity.

There is, let me repeat then, a saving virtue of priceless worth that emerges to transform the otherwise shattering incident. And it is seen in Peter's sheer honesty. How humble he must have been, first of all to be talked to face to face by this other man, Paul.

And then not only face to face, but before everybody. You know, Peter must have felt just like that. Do you remember Peter's temperament? He wasn't slow in coming forward.

I can almost hear Peter tempted to bark a little loud here. And to bite. Wouldn't you be thus tempted? But he didn't.

But he didn't. A man who can squarely, objectively and honestly face up to valid criticism leveled at himself, and realign his paths according to God's word is a man who can be trusted anywhere, anytime, under any circumstance. This is the man for me.

You see, there is no man that never makes a mistake. Paul made mistakes. You make mistakes, and I certainly do.

And the most precious thing in the world is to have a man who is honest enough when he's shown his mistake, to put it right and to go on in the light of truth and in the light of righteousness. Now, let me expand that a bit. We all know too well how very difficult it is to be honest with ourselves.

Especially so when a more clear sighted brother in Christ points out the error of our ways and has had to do so publicly for the glory of God. We know something of the danger of that way, the kind of thing that can happen. We know our human nature.

We know of men in the church of Jesus Christ who have shown great zeal and great enterprise. They've served and served and served. They've worn themselves out serving the Lord.

But they could never be shown their fault. Never. And if you showed them their fault, they would make mincemeat of you.

There are people who consider themselves beyond criticism. They're in an ivory palace of their own. They cannot be wrong in their own estimation.

And therefore, they are arrogant, rough shod, and sooner or later they will fall psychologically sick or spiritual. But Peter acknowledged his fault. Oh, this is wonderful.

He's risen so high. And here to be humbled so very much by his brother Apostle Paul. But he acknowledged his fault.

Now, this passage does not specifically say so. And some of you may be questioning, ah, where'd you get that from? Well, now, it is fairly evident, if you put things together, that this took place before Acts chapter 15, in the council of Jerusalem. And in Acts chapter 15, it is evident that Peter had acknowledged his fault.

And he would not countenance this kind of thing. And you don't need to be circumcised in order to have fellowship with Christian Jews. He's changed his mind.

Without such unqualified honesty, no man can grow in grace or in the knowledge of God. Armed with such grace, however, the very least can attain to the highest. Are you honest with God? Do you resent, terribly resent, being shown the truth about yourself, even when it is true? Now, that's Irish.

Do you know what I mean? When it is unquestionably true, however graciously it is done, do you resent having to face the truth about yourself? If so, your spiritual life may be strangled at that point. Pray for Peter's humility, because Peter's Lord still gives such humility to his followers. The folly, the fault was acknowledged, and the folly was forsaken.

And lastly, let me just say one word about this. Fellowship was restored. This, to me, is the most wonderful thing of all.

Fellowship was restored. We know from the rest of the New Testament that Peter, far from bearing a grudge against Paul, speaks of him in 2 Peter 3, the end chapter, as our beloved brother Paul. According to the wisdom that is given him, which Peter treats as something that he himself hasn't got.

Isn't this wonderful? The context is the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ, and he refers to Paul in this elevated way as somebody who's ahead of him in an understanding of certain truths. Our beloved brother Paul. But can you see what that means? Fellowship was not broken.

The man who was criticized and who was shown up and shown up in the open had grace to receive it, grace to acknowledge the truth of it, grace to turn away from his evil, and grace to see how really indebted he was to the man who dared stand up and say, Peter, you're a great man, but you're wrong. You read chapter 3 in 2 Peter verses 14 to 18, and with this I conclude. A lapse into folly, an example of fidelity, and the honesty that is a key to spiritual maturity.

A man who is rock-like in his convictions about Christ and the gospel must not be so rock-like that he cannot change his mind when he's wrong. We need the rock character concerning the certainties of the divine revelation, but we also need the pliability of the humble who, when he sees that he's done something wrong, turns away from it, acknowledges it to be sin if that is required, and humbly returns into fellowship even with those who have thus been the instruments of God's chastisement in his life. Oh God, make me a man like this.

Lord, make me a man like this.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/2/SID2390.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/j-glyn-owen/from-simon-to-peter-34-the-holy-spirit-and-reaction-to-criticism/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net