



## SHRINKING TABLES

**Sunday 22 May 2022**

*SERMON TRANSCRIPT*

This term we are using the metaphor a table to describe the place of community we have with God and with one another. That God extended His table to include us and we extend the table of our lives to include others. Timely for us because the one thing people most need is a place of community with God and people. And yet sadly, it's often the thing they least find because it is easier to shrink the table than extend it.

A couple weeks ago I spoke about how the first Christians were born into a world view that saw Israel at the table and all the other nations on the outside. Israel was a holy nation from among all nations. But, the shadow side of being called out/set apart from among the nations was an entrenched attitude of superiority, exclusivity, prejudice... And that had the potential to shape the culture of the church and the spread of the gospel.

We learnt in Acts chapter 10 how God deconstructed Peters cultural framework for how God relates to humanity. And what was the essence of what Peter learnt? **God has no favourites.** Does God love Israel today? You bet. Does Israel have an special place in the salvation story? Clearly - look how big the Old Testament is! Should you pray for Israel? Sure, why not. But God has no favourites - so you better pray for Palestine, North Korea, Russia and our new Prime Minister with the same gusto! That's the whole point of this revelation to Peter in Acts 10: God has no favourites. There is no person, tribe or nation who God is not extending the table to.

There is around 9-10 years between Acts chapter 10 and Galatians chapter 2. Acts 10 is around AD40. In AD47, in Acts chapter 13, Paul sets off on his first mission trip to what we call modern Turkey which included Antioch and Galatia. Paul planted churches and got into all

sorts of trouble, but essentially had a successful mission trip.

But behind Paul came a group of people who were inviting themselves into these young churches and undoing the good work by perverting, twisting the gospel: *"false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves."* (Galatians 2:4) Paul was starting churches, then people would follow behind him adding their cultural and religious teaching.

OK, so what was this teaching? Quite simply: "Jesus-plus. Sure, we accept Jesus as Messiah and you get in by grace through Jesus... But you stay in by works - namely following the Law of Moses..." They wanted people to be cultural Jews and followers of Jesus, which is why this faction is often referred to as the 'circumcision group', expecting male Gentile believers to adopt the whole Law.

This group of 'Jesus-plus-law-people' had influence - they even came from under James, the leader of the mother church in Jerusalem. They were likely smart, articulate, convincing and probably well-meaning... But ultimately misleading many new Christians, including Peter and Barnabas of all people.

So that was AD47, and the following year in AD48 Paul is back in Antioch and he notices something disturbing in the behaviour of Peter and he confronts him: *"When Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For 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."* (Galatians 2:11-12)

Which leads to the famous Council of Jerusalem in Acts chapter 15 - and then Paul writing about it to the Galatians here in AD49, which is his concerted effort in bringing his young churches back to the real gospel: God does not show favouritism - between those who are Jews and those who are not, even here between those who are apostles and those who are not.

So, in that 10 year period between Acts 10 to Galatians 2, Peter went from a revelation that the table is open and everyone is welcome to acting like, as Paul calls him, 'a hypocrite' - saying one thing and doing the opposite, drawing back from Gentiles, not eating with them - shrinking the table...

## **Why shrink the table?**

**1. Misplaced Fear** - We read in verse 12: *"he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group."* Peter, we read was **because he was afraid** of these esteemed, persuasive people. This is Peter!

Most of the time in the Bible fear is associated with fearing God, meaning honouring, trusting and submitting to God. Interestingly, Peter's revelation in Acts 10 was that God "*accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.*" But Peter's own fear of the Lord has been misplaced by the fear of man. Proverbs 25:29 says, "*Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.*"

Fear drives so many of our responses in life and to shrink the table – fear of someone's disapproval, looking foolish, being embarrassed, conflict, being irrelevant, being used, being out of control, out of comfort, out of cash... Fear is like a snare that catches free people and makes them slaves.

Fear is so powerful, isn't it? It consumes our decisions and our behaviours. Fear can override our faith and keep us from so many possibilities in life:

- We hold back on sharing our faith because we are afraid of not having answers to the tough question that may come back at us.
- We resist building relationships because we are afraid of getting hurt.
- We hold onto our money because we are afraid of running out.
- We are afraid of speaking out because we are afraid of the backlash.
- We are afraid of being vulnerable because we are afraid of being judged.
- We are afraid of drawing too near to God because he may ask us to do.

Fear steers people away from flourishing in life and extending the table. **Perhaps a great question in a quiet moment is to ask: *where is fear steering me?***

If fear is the social and emotional reason for Peter's behaviour, the other reason is about:

**2. Gospel Distortion** – "*We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of 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 the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.*" (Galatians 2:15-16)

The core belief at stake here is, "what justifies a person?" That's not language we usually use but 'Justification' is about what makes a person right in God's sight. It's a legal term where you are in the court and the Judge makes a ruling of your conviction being overturned and you can go free. We like to justify ourselves.

Paul is saying we all know that *a person is not justified by the works of the law*. In other words, you don't get in because of your culture, your diet, your application of any part of the moral law. Or in today's context we might say, we know that you are not justified by going to church, tithing, giving to charity, being a nice person, having a conservative political view. They simply aren't a criterion for acceptance by God and by association

they can't be a criteria for God's people. The only basis Paul says is by faith in Jesus Christ, not the works of the Law.

Why is Paul so determined to clarify this core belief with Peter and the Jerusalem church? Because it's no minor variation. If you need to add anything to the completed work of Jesus, then you have lost the one thing that distinguishes the Gospel from every other religious offering on the planet. The Gospel of Jesus is good news precisely because you can not earn your justification. You have nothing to offer of sufficient worth to compensate God or to earn your forgiveness.

If there is something you must do beyond faith then you enter a world of either perpetual insecurity of wondering if you've ticked all the boxes adequately, or a world of self-righteousness and pride looking down on everyone else because you think you are doing it right. Either is, as Paul says, 'a return to slavery'.

Do you see the distortion? You either have a gospel which says you obey and then you are saved. Or a Gospel that says you are saved and then you obey. But they are not the same thing - one is life and one is death. It's not a matter of whether grace means you don't have to obey. It's a matter of why you obey - out of self-interest, to get saved, or gratitude at being saved. Where is your obedience coming from? This is the most fundamental distortion of the Gospel.

So Paul identifies misplaced fear, and gospel distortion - but I want you to also notice one last reason for shrinking the table:

**3. Gospel Alignment** - Paul says in verse 14, "*they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel.*" What is Paul getting at here? Peter knew the gospel. He knows God has no favourites. And if righteousness could be gained through the Law, Christ died for nothing! But he is not living in line with the truth of the Gospel. Knowing something and living it out are two different things and you could argue you don't truly know it if it's not resulted in changed living. I know it would be good for me to exercise regularly and eat a healthy diet - but I'm not living all that aligned with that truth. Peter drawing back is Peter not thinking through the implications of what he already believes. And that's so true for us.

You might believe you are saved by grace, but you keep trying to earn it. You might believe God provides, but you are anxious all the time. It's easy to not live out the implications of what we believe. But if we live aligned with the Gospel - in our personal life, work, relationships, spending, lifestyle, priorities, and your table - I think we can face our fears, be set free in the good news of the Gospel, and extend the table of our lives.

May we not fear the approval of others, or be driven by fear and anxiety. May we know the good news of grace, this gift we cannot earn but simply receive. And may God help us, through His enabling power, to live all our lives aligned to the Gospel.