

Fact Sheet for **“Can Jewish Believers Eat Bacon?”**
Galatians 2:11-21

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Have you ever stepped into a room where you know there should have been Christians, but there was nobody there? Then the thought briefly runs through your head, “Maybe I’ve been left behind!” That thought lasts just a few seconds, until our theology clicks in. We know that we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ!

Galatians 2:11-21 is really a continuation of Paul’s thoughts from 1:11-2:10. In those verses Paul lines out where he learned the Gospel... directly from God! It wasn’t until 17 years later that he set before James, Peter, and John the gospel he was proclaiming for their evaluation. This gospel stressed that we are saved by faith, not by obedience to the Mosaic Law. These church leaders added nothing to Paul’s theology, and quickly gave himself and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship that they should go to the Gentiles. But the full implications of the gospel were still being worked through by the early church. What happened in Antioch would point this up. It was after Paul and Barnabas met with James, Peter, and John that Paul even had to correct Peter.

¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.

When Peter came to Antioch he initially was eating with the Gentiles. But after these men arrived he began to separate himself from the Gentiles out of fear for what these Jewish visitors thought. It’s difficult for us in our culture to appreciate the religious significance of the Jews sharing a meal with the Gentiles. There were the traditional Jewish prohibitions against eating unclean food such as the consumption of pork, clams, or crab (Deuteronomy 14:8-10), eating food offered to idols (Acts 21:25), and eating meat from which the blood had not been properly drained (Leviticus 3:17; 7:26-27; 17:10-14). Devout Jews would have remembered the story of Daniel and his friends refusing to eat the king’s choice food (Daniel 1:3-16). They would also have known the story of the Maccabean revolt when the determined Jewish patriots chose death rather than eat unclean food (1 Maccabees 1:41-63). These traditions were pressed into even stricter requirements by the Pharisees who forbade any observant Jew from sharing a meal with a Gentile. Although these men came from James it is very doubtful that James endorsed their theology. But even Peter was swayed by their influence and began separating himself from the Gentile believers. What was at stake in this was the indivisibility of the body of Christ. Is there a Jewish church and a Gentile church, or are we all one church? (Read Ephesians 2:11-22) Peter had not thought through his theology closely enough, and his actions began swaying others.

¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Paul opposed Peter publicly. Don’t you love Paul’s logic here? What could Peter possibly answer? Paul was calling Peter to boldly stand for the truth of the gospel. Notice that in the next three verses Paul uses the plural “we” and “our”. He was referring to the Jewish believers like himself and Peter.

¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

From the Jewish perspective, people were sinners simply by the fact that they were Gentiles. But Paul knew that there was an inconvenient truth of Jewish theology... no one will be justified by obedience to

the Law of Moses! That Law required 100% obedience from the cradle to the grave. Anything less would make a person liable to judgment. Jesus echoed this in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:48). This is so much more than “really good” or “devoted”. It is squeaky clean perfect! The only man who lived and ever met this standard was Jesus!

Paul introduced a legal word here “justified”. This word literally means “declared righteous”. Its opposite is “guilty” and therefore condemned. Even the Jewish Christians were justified through faith in Jesus Christ, not by their obedience to the Old Testament Law.

^{17a} But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?

This may well have been the reasoning of the men who came from James... “Peter, when you eat with the Gentiles you are breaking the Law of Moses. You are engaging in sin! Then, when you try to justify your behavior by appealing to our common faith in Christ, you are making Christ a servant of sin!” Paul responds to this with one of the strongest negations in his vocabulary.

^{17b} Certainly not! ¹⁸ For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.

Paul now switches to the first person, “I” and “myself”. Paul was saying that if he rebuilt a theology of justification through obedience he would be rebuilding a theology where he would end up guilty, and therefore condemned.

¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.

Paul here is mentioning death and resurrection... death to the Law and resurrection to life through faith in Jesus Christ. Now be careful here. The burning issues in the Galatian church were circumcision, feast days, and food laws. These were ceremonial issues. Paul was not saying that the Law had lost all its meaning or relevance for the Christian believer.

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

When Paul wrote “I have been crucified with Christ” he had in mind the previous verse, he was dead to the Law! Now he lives through faith in Jesus Christ!

²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

If our eternal salvation is still on the basis of obedience to the Law of Moses then Christ would have died for no purpose.

So, can Jewish believers eat bacon? Yes! Their justification is through faith in Jesus Christ, not through Law obedience. They may freely choose to observe those Old Testament dietary laws, but their salvation and that of others does not depend on Law obedience.

Don't let anyone tell you that you have to obey this or that Old Testament Law or you are not saved. If any doubts come to your mind about being “good enough” for salvation then remind yourself that we are justified through faith in Jesus Christ. This can never be taken away from us. We may walk into an empty room and briefly think we've been left behind, but then remember quickly that we are justified by faith and that can never be taken away from us. If someone you are witnessing to thinks that they can just say the words of the “sinners prayer”, not praying from the heart”, and have an eternal fire insurance policy, then they are only fooling themselves.

If you are tempted to think that this gives us freedom to sin, then stay tuned for the rest of Galatians.