

Introduction: Last week we saw Jesus' skillful power in dealing with our wandering hearts, resulting in the daily reclaiming of our wayward souls as He continually exercises His shepherding care. Jesus is truly a '911' Savior, who often appears at the 11th hour to rescue us from a path of destruction and to guide our feet back onto the path of salvation! It was "at just the right time" that Jesus came, "born of a woman, born under the law", to save us, (Galatians 4:4). By means of this week's Bible notes, may we cry out to Him at our darkest times, and discover how willingly He shows up at the perfect time to lead us back onto the path of life.

Mon/Tues: read Matthew 18:10-14, 2 Corinthians 6:3 & Galatians 2:11-16. Last week we celebrated Jesus' ability to take his concern about sin's offensiveness, (Mt.18:6-10), and apply it personally to our sin when we, like Peter, become a stumbling block to others. Through his three-fold denial, Peter contributed to the abandonment of Jesus by the rest of the Apostles on the night of Jesus' trial. No wonder that Jesus in John 21 must probe Peter with the question, "Simon... do you love me?" Jesus knows that Peter will never be ready to care for His Church until his callousness towards others' Christian walks is corrected. Jesus proceeds with this in John 21:15ff., thereby restoring Simon Peter to useful service in the church. With the repeated command, "Feed my sheep", Peter discovers the joy of being back in the service of his Master.

However, like the rest of us, Peter's restoration does not mean he would never again cause others to stumble. Alas, we like him so infrequently live up to 2 Corinthians 6:3's command to "put no stumbling block" in the path of our Gospel witness. Instead, the same old friends that led us astray before can so often show up, prompting us to mute our Gospel witness and hide our commitment to His grace in our lives. The result is that we wander dangerously off the safe way of Gospel living, and cause others to stumble as well.

For example, in Galatians 2:11-16, that is exactly what Peter does once again. He is intimidated by a visit from Jewish false teachers from Jerusalem, who pressure him not to eat or fellowship with Gentile uncircumcised members of the church. He gives into this sin, returning to his old position of a lack of love for his Gentile brothers and sisters in the church – in order to satisfy his old associates from his younger days. The verdict on this behavior is harsh: Peter and the other compromisers of Gospel truth, "were not acting in line with the truth of the Gospel" (Gal. 2:14).

Meditate and Pray: "Lord, please heal our wayward examples and crooked walking, whereby, even to our closest loved ones, we distort the clear witness of the Gospel. Forgive us when we have not led others in a straight line towards Jesus – but have caused others' feet to wander as they follow our crooked steps. Please Lord Jesus, no matter how many times it takes, confront us, chastise us, stand up to us, until the obstacles to others' believing are removed from the path of our Gospel witness and lives. Forgive us when we are the biggest stumbling block towards the conversion of others, or when we cause those "little ones who believe in you" to stumble through our lack of loving concern. How hurt the Gentile believers must have been in Antioch when they saw the Apostle Peter turn his back on them. How hurt you must be, Lord Jesus, when you see us turn our back on you in order to please old associates and friends. Have mercy upon us. Make us loyal above all else to the pure and true Gospel of grace and to our Savior. Amen."

Weds/Thurs: read Galatians 2:14-16, 2 Corinthians 6:3 and Matthew 18:7. We often think of “things which cause others to sin”, (Matthew 18:7), as sins of the flesh, and immoral behavior. Such is often the case. It is often the Christian church with its ungodly example that hardens the hearts of unbelievers towards Jesus. When the world sees us living as sinfully as it does, why should they come to the very Savior who is denied by our bad behavior as professing Christians? But Peter’s great sin of denying the grace of the Gospel in Galatians 2:14, whereby he began with other Judaizers to “walk contrary” to that Gospel, is a stumbling block precisely because of its false claim to an outward standard of righteousness by works. Consider these translations of Galatians 2:14, describing what Peter and we do when we set up false standards of righteousness through religious exclusivism and legalistic works. At such times, we ... with Peter are: “**not walking uprightly** according to the truth of the gospel...” (KJV).

The Greek word here is a unique occurrence in the New Testament, and is the word from which we get our medical word, “orthopaedics”: **or-tho-po-de’o**, to walk straight or uprightly. Applied to the way we walk in faith according to the Gospel, it means that the Gospel is a straight line, leading to a daily reliance on the Grace of God, both for daily forgiveness and daily living. But Peter turned for a time away from “straight-forward reliance on grace” to walk again in the works of his own self-righteous claims as a Jew. What hypocrisy, as Paul so faithfully declares to Peter in Galatians 2:14: “*How is it, Peter, that you rely on deep, unconditional grace to cover over your daily struggles with sin, and then hold others to a higher standard through outward customs which you yourself don’t keep?*”

Meditate and Pray: “*Ah, Lord, how crafty the evil one is in seeking to turn our feet off of the path of simple, straight-forward Gospel living. If he can’t make us sinfully turn away into the path of ungodly, wayward living, he seeks to detour us away from grace into the path of religious pride and hypocrisy. Save us from his stratagems, as a church as well as individuals! Amen*”.

Friday: read Matthew 18:7, Galatians 2:14 and Acts 15:7-11. As a measure of Peter’s hypocrisy, consider how Peter argues *against the very sin he later commits!* He states to the whole church in Jerusalem in Acts 15:10 - that they should **not** put the burdens of the law (in terms of dietary rules, circumcision and self-righteousness), upon the Gentiles, because not even they as Jews had been able to observe or keep that law as a way of salvation! Then, in Galatians 2:14, he confuses the Gospel of grace by trying to live under that very law, (“Do not touch, do not eat, do not associate with Gentiles”)!

Meditate and Pray: “*Lord Jesus, please uncover our deceitfulness and hypocrisy, so that we as your church might be cleansed of all such lies, and that Gentiles might be brought safely under the sound of your pure grace, and not confused by the mixed messages which we can easily send by our sins and prejudices. Amen*”.

Sat/Sun: read Matthew 18:7, Psalm 119:5 & Hebrews 12:12-13. We conclude these Bible notes on the problem of hypocrisy in the church and Jesus’ efforts to warn us against the offense of causing weak, new Christians to stumble - by considering the wonderful promise of “straight-walking” that is contained in the Gospel of God’s grace. The good news is that God Himself is committed to healing such waywardness and bad examples in our lives, according to Hebrews 12:12-13:

“Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, **so that** what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed”. (ESV)

Do you understand the promise contained here in Hebrews 12? God is the One who calls us to walk in His ways, and who “marks out the race course” for us in Hebrews 12:1. Our Savior Jesus is the One who has “run the race” for us as our Savior in Hebrews 12:2. We are to fix our eyes on Him as we run with joy in the course of God’s commands (Psalm 119: 32).

But we may well object:

“The course marked out by God in His law does not give my feet strength to follow. Jesus’ example of running is not enough. I need more help! How can I walk, let alone run, when I have discovered this week that my good intentions and commitments to God’s way contain my own twisted detours in sin; when I can so easily cause others to stumble, and when my own feet are so handicapped and my own character so twisted as to cause others to follow me into the path of my waywardness? How can I set a course for others to follow, and how can I keep in the way of grace myself?”

Meditate and Pray: Ah, well, ask yourself this question: “How does God the Father *effectively straighten our crooked feet*, so that, despite our stumblings, we keep to the course and persevere, finding ourselves in the end safely at the finish line of the salvation of our souls?”

Well, consider that this promise of healed feet and a straightening of our lame, wandering feet in Hebrews 12:12-13 *actually* refers to a way of walking in God’s covenant from the book of Jeremiah. For example, in Hebrews 10:16’s quote of Jeremiah 31:33, God promises to cure *from within* our sinful tendency to crooked walking. He will put the ‘spiritual GPS’ of His Law within us – a new navigation system! Yes, at times, like Peter, we wander off and cause others to follow us into sin. But in the end, it is His Spirit who convicts us and corrects us, and brings us back upon the path. Think of it! How glad Peter must have been when Paul’s sharp rebuke in Galatians 2:14 brought him back to his senses! “Let a righteous man rebuke me – it shall be a kindness”! Isn’t that in the Psalms somewhere?

But perhaps the most beautiful picture of how God straightens out, progressively, over time, all our crooked, deceitful ways, is Jeremiah 31:8-9 with which we close this week:

“Behold, I will bring them from the North country, and gather them from the coasts of the world, *with* the blind and the lame among them, *with* the woman with child, and her that is delivered also: a great company shall return hither.

They shall come weeping, and with mercy will I bring them again: I will lead them by the rivers of water in a **straight way, wherein they shall not stumble**: for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.” (1599 Geneva Bible)