



Week 3: Freedom from Uniformity **Read Galatians 2:1-14**

This lesson is about three things:

- 1) Conflict resolution in the church
- 2) The Jerusalem Conference between Paul and the apostles
- 3) The words “truth” and “grace”

Introduction

If you wander through the old Jerusalem today, you will come to an interior courtyard, bounded on all sides by grey-brown walls that dominate the architecture of the old city. Nestled into one corner of the courtyard is the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This is the church that was built on the most traditional site of the tomb of Jesus, as well as what has been viewed as the place of his crucifixion. Scholars believe that site of the church had been a place of veneration for the early Christians, and that Roman emperor Hadrian built a temple to the goddess Venus on the site, as a deliberate affront to the growing Christian movement. Emperor Constantine in the fourth century converted to Christianity, and ordered the temple to be destroyed and a church built there. Early sources say that his mother Helena found the true cross and the tomb on the site as the excavations were underway to build the church. Since that day, a church has been on that site, sometimes destroyed and then rebuilt in the shifting control of the city throughout history.

If you go as a pilgrim to see the church, you might be struck by two things. First, you would encounter the wide breadth and diversity of the Christian devotion. On a recent visit, I was moved by a French nun lying prostrate on the floor in one of the small chapels, praying and weeping. Behind me was a group of South Korean Christians, all of whom were rocking and praying. A group of what I can only suppose were Russian Christians were singing loudly. Since 1852, the care of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre has been shared by six Christian denominations: the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian, Coptic, Syriac, and Ethiopian Orthodox churches. The facility is laid out in sections, some shared by all, others belong strictly to a particular denomination or group.

I am overwhelmed by how much diversity I see. There is diversity in ways of worship, polity and organization, culture, and ways of life in response to God. How boring would the world be if we all worshipped the same way, claimed the exact same doctrine, prayed the very same prayers. And

yet, it is the very same Jesus. The same love of God. For the most part, the same scripture. I am always reminded of how small, how narrow is my own understanding of how God moves in our midst.

Second, if you look more deeply into that diversity, you would be saddened by the animosity that separates those who govern a place devoted to loving God who taught us that “God is love.” A set of complicated policies and procedures govern the rights of the other groups to pass through each section in a processional on any given day, and some of the sections of the church remain contested. There is a small section of the roof which is in dispute between the Copts and Ethiopians. At least one Coptic monk at any given time sits there on a chair placed on that particular spot, because they are afraid if they get up from there, the Ethiopians will take it. In 2002, a monk moved his chair eight inches to get it into the shade. This was interpreted as a hostile act and violation of boundaries, and a fight ensued among the monks that led to hospitalizations. The keys to the church have been held by a Moslem family for centuries, because the Christians can’t get along well enough to trust one another with the keys. There is a ladder, dubbed “the immovable ladder,” which stands as a symbol of the tension that dominates the facility. During the early 1800s, a man placed the ladder on a ledge against an exterior second-floor wall of the church. A dispute broke out as to which group controlled that outside wall, and the threat of violence escalated. The ladder has remained there ever since.



They'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.

Conflict has been a part of the church since Jesus. The gospel of Luke includes this simple verse regarding how the disciples interacted. “*An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest.*” (Luke 9:46) We get mixed messages in the book of Acts: On the one hand, we read:

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” (Acts 2:44-45)

and

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” (Acts 4:32)

Sounds idyllic. Unified. Beautiful. But then, in the very next chapter, we read about Ananias and Sapphira, who held back the proceeds from the sale of land and lied to the apostles about it. As a result, they were struck dead! *“And great fear struck the whole church...” (Acts 5:11)*

The Jerusalem Council in Galatians

As we have learned, Paul’s letter to the Galatians is born out of conflict in the early church over whether Gentiles were to convert to Judaism in order to become Christians. In chapter 2, Paul describes a trip he made to Jerusalem, and how he and Peter, James and John, (sometimes called the “triumvirate” of church leadership in Jerusalem), worked their way through this issue.

- 1) Paul gives tacit acknowledgment to the authority and leadership of the apostles in Jerusalem. He refers to them as “acknowledged leaders” and says he wants to make sure he is not running “in vain,” meaning he is concerned his own work would not be acknowledged. (v 2) A few verses later, he refers to James, Peter and John as “acknowledged pillars.”
- 2) However, both here and throughout the letter, Paul makes it clear that he has the same authority as do these apostles, and that he stands on equal ground with them. He has reminded both the apostles, and now the Galatians, that he has been given a direct revelation, and so he is not actually bound by the authority of these apostles. His argument is that God does not use hierarchical authority to oversee matters of faith: “God shows no partiality.” (v 6) In other words, it is the truth within him and given to him that gives him authority, rather than some hierarchical system of church government, with apostles being above other followers of Jesus.
- 3) Paul disputes the authority and the motives of those who vehemently disagree with him, saying they are spies and false believers, who want to enslave us. (v 4) As we discussed in previous lessons, Paul is just furious, and he is not afraid to say exactly what he thinks of those who oppose him. This is a man not afraid of conflict, and he does not hesitate to impugn the character and motives of those of what is usually called “the circumcision group.”
- 4) Paul repeats the agreement that was reached, that they would
 - a. join together in “the right hand of fellowship,”
 - b. have differing approaches in different contexts, one to the Gentiles and one to the Jews
 - c. be bound together in certain essentials, in this case remembering the poor, but unstated is Paul’s focus on grace through faith for salvation, and the power of the Holy Spirit.
- 5) Apparently, the conversation and agreement in Jerusalem doesn’t solve the problem, and when Peter comes to Antioch at a later date, he seems to flip flop mid-stream. At first, he is willing to eat with Gentiles, just as he does in Acts 10 when he eats with Cornelius, after having a vision in which he is told “not to call anything unclean that God had cleansed.” But when others from Jerusalem show up, Peter apparently changes his tune to try to keep everyone happy. In response, Paul calls him on the carpet. He points out the places that the Jerusalem apostles’ stance on the issue of circumcision and dietary laws differs from their actual practice, and calls

them hypocrites. (vv 11-14) He lifts up the contradiction between speech and practice, pointing out that Titus was not compelled to be circumcised, yet was still accepted. (v 3)

The Jerusalem Council in Acts

The fifteenth chapter of Acts describes a key meeting in Jerusalem between Paul and Barnabas and the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem. This took place in about 50 AD, after Paul's first missionary journey, but before his second. Some people from the circumcision faction had come to Antioch, and were promoting their doctrine there. This prompted Paul to take Barnabas with him and travel from Antioch of Syria to Jerusalem, and meet there with Peter, James, and John, as well as an assembly of the elders, to see if he could get the matter settled once and for all. Acts 15 records what is often called the Jerusalem Conference or the Council of Jerusalem, the first documented council of the Church for the purpose of deciding doctrine.

There is some debate about whether the meeting Paul shares in Galatians 2 is the same conference that is recorded in Acts 15. There are some discrepancies. Acts 15 doesn't mention Titus at all. Acts 15 has a larger meeting, including a whole assembly of elders, while Galatians 2 indicates Paul met only with a few leaders. Finally, Acts 15 describes a letter from the apostles purporting to address the issue. It would be surprising for Paul not to have mentioned that treatise in his letter to the Galatians if he had it available to back up his claim. It is these discrepancies that suggest to some an early date, prior to AD 50, for the letter to Galatians. These scholars believe that the Galatians meeting was a private one at some date before the Jerusalem conference and even before Paul's first missionary journey, perhaps at the time of the visit very briefly noted in Acts 11: *"The disciples [in Antioch] determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul."* (Acts 11:29-30)

Most scholars, however, feel that the discussion in Galatians and the council in Acts 15 are the same event, as the approaches and arguments are so similar. Luke (remember—he is the author of Acts) describes the conference this way:

- 1) The disagreement was between Paul and Barnabas, and "some believers who belong to the sect of the Pharisees," who taught that Gentiles needed to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses. This is "the circumcision faction" Paul speaks about in Galatians.
- 2) Paul and Barnabas base their argument first on
 - a. The great growth in the church through the conversion of the Gentiles.
 - b. the joy this brought to believers as they shared it on their trip from Antioch to Jerusalem. (v 15:3)
 - c. The signs and wonders that had been done among the Gentiles. (v 15:12)
- 3) Ironically, in Acts, the response came first from Peter, not Paul.
 - a. Peter reminds the elders of his own calling to the Gentiles (calling to mind the same experience in the house of Cornelius in Acts 10). Luke says this comes from Peter, while Galatians indicates this remembrance came from Paul. (v 7)
 - b. Peter reminds them that the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit. (v 8)
 - c. He Points to the Gentiles faith. (v 9)

- d. He explains that both Gentiles and Jews are saved by God's grace. (v 11)
- 4) The next response came from the apostle James.
- a. James quotes the prophet Amos, who prophesied that one day there would be a restoration of the true people of God, one which would include even the Gentiles.
 - b. James proposes a compromise: the laws that the Gentiles would have to follow are the ones that Leviticus applies to foreigners living within the bounds of Jewish communities: 1) to refrain from food that had been sacrificed to idols, 2) refrain from fornication (some believe this means, 3) eat no meat from strangled animals, and 4) refrain from drinking blood (raw meat.) These were proposed to keep unity in the church, and to refrain from offending the sensibilities of Jewish Christians.
- 5) Finally, a response is formulated: A letter is composed and sent with two other disciples – Judas and Silas—along with Paul and Barnabas, back to Antioch, the spiritual center of the growing Gentile church. It seemed that the matter was resolved.

Moving Forward In Our Days

One of my favorite stories is from Nikki Gumbel, the founder of the Alpha program.

A man was standing in the middle of the Golden Gate Bridge, admiring the view, when another tourist walked up alongside him to do the same. The following conversation ensued:

"What an awesome God!," he said, as he took in the view.

I turned to him and I said, "Oh, are you a Christian?"

He said, "Yes, I am a Christian."

I said, "So am I," and we shook hands.

I said, "Are you a liberal or a fundamental Christian?"

He said, "I'm a fundamental Christian."

I said, "So am I," and we smiled and nodded to each other.

I said, "Are you a covenant or dispensational fundamental Christian?"

He said, "I'm a dispensational fundamental Christian."

I said, "So am I," and we slapped one another on the back.

I said, "Are you an early Acts, mid Acts, or late Acts dispensational fundamental Christian?"

He said, "I'm a mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian."

I said, "So am I," and we agreed to exchange Christmas cards each year.

I said, "Are you an Acts 9 or 13 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian?"

He said, "I'm an Acts 9 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian."

I said, "So am I," and we hugged one another right there on the bridge.

I said, "Are you a pre-Trib or post-Trib Acts 9 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian?"

He said, "I'm a pre-Trib Acts 9 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian."

I said, "So am I," and we agreed to exchange our kids for the summer.

I said, "Are you a twelve-in or twelve-out pre-Trib Acts 9 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian?"

He said, "I'm a twelve-in pre-Trib Acts 9 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian."

I said, "You heretic!" and I pushed him off the bridge.'

Yes, there is conflict still in the church today. We see it in the wider capital C church, as we differ over everything from to social issues. We see it within denominations themselves, over issues of human sexuality, women in ministry, and other issues of Biblical interpretation. We see it in local churches, divided over politics or more likely the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. And there is nothing that can steal the joy and enthusiasm of a Christian more than bickering in the family of faith.

What can we learn about division, diversity, and community from those apostles in Jerusalem, and from Paul and Luke as they describe this important debate? How can we maneuver our way forward through the divisive issues that threaten the church?

- 1) **Don't quit.** First, solving problems and resolving conflict isn't easy. The Holy Spirit creates some friction when she moves through. The human body works on tension: the arm bends at the elbow because a muscle pulls one bone against a different one. The body of Christ (that is you and me) works because of there are differing views, differing spiritual gifts, different experiences, different passions. Sometimes, we even get angry. We see that in Acts 15, and certainly see that in Galatians. It is naïve to believe that real love for one another means no conflict at all (at least it isn't the case at my house). For most of us, the conflict isn't fun. It wasn't fun for the apostles, and it isn't fun for us. But then neither was the cross for Jesus. What matters is the way we work through the conflict. We are to struggle to be "true," meaning authentic and honest and real. We are to strive to be "true to the gospel," meaning that the reality of our lives is to mirror the love and grace of Jesus. Still, it isn't easy.
- 2) **Wrestle with Scripture:** James points to Scripture from the prophet Amos to help solve the issue, and we should look to scripture too. We will see Paul do so in upcoming chapters of Galatians. Of course, there are plenty of Old Testament scriptures that lift up the necessity of circumcision and following Jewish law. James chooses one that the Holy Spirit led him to at that moment, pointing to the importance of Gentile inclusion. I wish it was as simple as finding the right two verses that solve our problem. Sometimes, we use the sacred texts to say what they want we them to say. Sometimes, we use the text of Scripture as an answer to a question that the author never intended to address. Many of the challenges we face today were not the same as those Paul faced, but the Scripture gives us basic principles to apply to new situations. Nonetheless, we study the Bible because it is a foundational source of God's revelation to us. As we become steeped in the story it tells and the God it reveals, we find ourselves formed by its message.
- 3) **Look to Experience:** The real selling point for all the elders in Jerusalem was the awesome things that were happening among the Gentiles. They were choosing faith! The Holy Spirit was

moving among them! “Wonders and signs” were happening. Jesus says “*you will know them by their fruit.*” (Matthew 7:16) Are lives being changed? Are broken hearts being healed? Are prisoners to addiction being set free? Are families being drawn together? Are lives being given meaning? Is there more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? (Galatians 5:22-23) No legalistic system could stop what God was doing. If someone tried to stamp out the church one place, it was like a brush fire that would ignite somewhere else. Jump aboard when you see what God is doing.

- 4) **Identify essentials:** For Paul, salvation by grace through faith is the gospel. Anything else isn't a gospel. This is the essential component. For the circumcision faction, it was more than that. We need to be careful about mischaracterizing the motives of this group. They were not trying to exclude Gentiles. It wasn't a racial issue. They just felt like to be a part of the covenant people of God, one needed to live by the covenant. That was essential for them. And everyone agreed that care for the poor was an essential. Here is the rub. One man's essential is another man's optional. Sometimes, we are squabbling in the church about what we think is essential to the Christian life. Those are debates worth having. They may even be debates worth dividing over. But sometimes, we are squabbling about things we know are not essential to the Christian life. These are all about our preferences and our comfort. We absolutely need to show some grace in these areas.
- 5) **Audience matters:** My favorite verse in this chapter is this one Galatians 2:9 “*and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.*” Each of them had a specific context, a specific target audience, a specific calling for the spread of the gospel, and the non-essential components of the gospel message were to be tailored to that context. Certainly, this has been the history of the gospel message throughout the centuries. In parts of the world, it would be so destructive to the gospel to put men and women in the same room together to worship. It would be so offensive in their cultural setting. You and I would not flinch being together, and in fact would probably reject the message if it was meant to imply that men and women were to be treated differently. But our culture, our life, is not their life. The most important thing is that people be drawn to experience the grace of God, and to open themselves up to the Holy Spirit's work within them.
- 6) **Care about others:** The compromise position of the Jerusalem conference, including the prohibition of certain practices, was proposed to keep from alienating the majority Jewish-Christian community, particularly in Jerusalem. If we take a “we don't care if we make them mad-they are wrong” approach, we misunderstand the diversity of the body of Christ. Peter and James extended to Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship. The word means community – life in relationship with others. Throughout his letters, Paul reiterates this theme: Do what you can not to offend. It may mean you need to give a little here and there. And, if you don't win out on the item you support, don't bail out. Recognize that those who disagree with you are part of your family, and you are united with them, even if not uniform. Later in Galatians, Paul writes “*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” Galatians 3:28
- 7) **Give the Holy Spirit room and time to move:** It is clear that early on, the status quo “we've never accepted that before” faction was dominant. It is clear from Galatians that Peter and

many of the elders in Jerusalem adopted the position of the large Jewish contingent in the city, that following Jewish law is what matters. But over time, as they saw lives changed, their hearts softened and their minds changed. The Holy Spirit does that. It changes minds. It wasn't just the Jerusalem Council that did it; it was the leadership of the Holy Spirit to move them forward toward God's purpose to reach the whole world with his love. Among Martin Luther King, Jr.'s best known phrases is "The arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice." We have our timing, our process, our way of getting things done. We think it is important that we win today's battle, whichever side we are on. But the Holy Spirit operates on God's time, and according to God's operating system. We pray, we work, we campaign, we sacrifice even our lives for what we believe is right – of course. But sometimes we must let go of our own agendas and our own timing and let God do God's thing.

Sunday School Words

Truth

In Galatians 2:14, Paul accuses Peter and those in the circumcision faction of "not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel." The word truth is bandied about throughout Scripture. Jesus says he is the way and the truth and the life. (John 14:6) He says that the Holy Spirit will guide us into the truth. (John 16:13) Jesus tells Pilate at his trial that he came to "testify to the truth." Pilate responds "what is truth?" (John 18:37-38). What does this term mean?

In the Old Testament, the word focused on moral goodness. God's character is the standard for what is good and true and pure. For example, if I buy a board that is "true," I mean it is unbent, not warped. In the OT, a person who is true is morally good, as God is morally good. In the New Testament, the notion of moral goodness is still present, but added to it is the idea of authenticity and veracity. To be true is to be real, the opposite of fake. Jesus, who describes himself as the Truth, is not only the way to the Father, but also the reality of the Father. Through Jesus, we know and can fully experience the reality of God. The Greek word for truth, *alētheia*, literally means "not hidden." When Jesus says he is the truth, he is saying he discloses the reality of the Father. If you know Jesus, you know God. When Paul accuses Peter of not conforming to the truth of the gospel, he is saying that he is conforming to a fake gospel. His claim that Peter is not acting consistently is literally that he is "crooked walking," instead of walking in a way that is open and honest and authentic.

Grace

The most important word in the Old Testament is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is translated "loving kindness" or "steadfast love" or "covenant love." It means God's choice to love the children of Israel because they belong to him. We love our children not because they behave as we desire, but because they are ours. God's steadfast love in the Old Testament is that kind of love.

The New Testament equivalent for *hesed* is grace. Grace is God's unmerited favor, (expressed in God's actions of mercy and salvation). It is God's undeserved love for all of us that leads God to choose to take away the guilt of our sin. It is God's undeserved love for us that leads God to choose to take away the power of our sin, and make us holy. Grace is required for humans to take any steps toward salvation – on their own, humans are incapable of any efforts that lead to salvation. The word in Greek is *charis*, which is a whole lot like *charisma*, which means "gift." Grace is free. No hoops to jump through at all. Grace comes before faith. Faith is a response to grace, not a prerequisite for it.

Paul succinctly lays out his case for salvation by grace through faith in another letter *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9)*

In our passage today, Paul says that he was given grace to be an apostle to the Gentiles. His claim is that his particularly ministry wasn't something he chose, or deserved, or looked for in any way. Rather, it was from God, and he viewed it as a remarkable gift. It was a grace. The leaders with whom he was conferencing recognized not only the doctrine of grace that Paul was preaching, but also the grace of God that pervaded his ministry.

We often speak about three particular forms of grace:

- **Prevenient grace** – grace that goes before any human initiative. It is God working to ignite within us the desire to know God. It is this grace that enables one to respond to accept or reject God. God chose us before we chose God.
- **Justifying grace** – aligns humankind with God in restored relationship. Grace takes away the guilt of our sin.
- **Sanctifying grace** – takes away the power of our sin, and gradually transforms each of us and all humankind into the people God created us to be. Sanctifying grace empowers a person to become more like Jesus. John Wesley called this grace the power to “go on to perfection.” While justifying grace brings about change in a person's relationship with God, sanctifying grace brings about change in the person.

Conclusion

Conflict will rob us of energy. It will overwhelm us with anger or anxiety. It will distract us from things we think really matter. It will strain relationships and can end friendships. And making a decision to follow Jesus doesn't make those waves go away. But conflict can be a good thing. It forces us to examine our beliefs and motives. It challenges us to consider change. It upends our comfortable tidy worlds and turns us to ask God for direction. We don't all have to be the same, and we don't all have to view God from the same perspective. But God's desire is that we be bound together in the Holy Spirit.

On the way to the cross, Jesus prays for Peter, James, and John, as he knows there will be challenges ahead. He prays *“The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:22-23)* I think he was praying for St. Paul, too. And, of course, for you and me.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What was the conflict between Paul and the other church leaders (Peter, James, John) about?
2. Where do you see conflicts in the church today? What effect do you believe that has on both Christians and non-believers?
3. Paul calls Peter out for being a hypocrite about dietary laws. Is there any part of your own faith that is hypocritical? How can you work on this?
4. An adage commonly attributed to John Wesley is: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and, in all things, charity." This was also Paul's approach regarding evangelizing to both the Gentiles and Jews. What are the essentials to the Christian life? What are the non-essentials?
5. How does your family background with conflict resolution affect the way you approach conflict today, both in your relationships and in the church?
6. What does it mean for you to pursue truth? Is it about being right? Is it about an understanding of God?
7. Paul was given the grace to be an apostle to the Gentiles. What gift, or grace, from God have you been given? How are you using that grace?
8. What conflict in your life do you work through? What are the barriers? Is there a step you can take, with God's help, to solve the problem?



Week 3: Freedom from Conformity Daily Readings

Week 3: Day 1 - Ephesians 2:1-10

Commentary: This week, we are considering the concept of grace. In the Galatians passage for this week (Galatians 2:1-14), he says that he was given grace to be an apostle to the Gentiles. Paul is the most prolific writer on the topic of grace in the Bible and he introduces the formula of salvation by grace through faith in his letters.

The idea that one can be reconciled to God by their own effort and good works is called Pelagianism, based on the teachings of Pelagius in the 4th century. Pelagius taught that humans didn't need grace and that they could do enough good works to earn salvation through their own efforts.

Even though Paul says that we are not saved by our own doing, the last verse of this passage says that we are created for good works. What Paul means by this is that good works do not earn salvation, but that salvation compels us to do good works. Our desires, motivations, behavior, and interests all change so that works are no longer the means of saving ourselves, but instead they are seen as opportunities to help build the kingdom of God.

Reflection Question: Do you ever find yourself trying to do good works to please God?

Week 3: Day 2 - Galatians 1:15

Commentary: Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus came suddenly and unexpectedly (for Paul). But as the scripture says, God set Paul apart before he was born. God has placed a special call on everyone's life, which is extended through the gift of prevenient grace. This kind of grace, which was mentioned in this week's lesson, is the grace that precedes any kind of human initiative. It is the way that God works to ignite within us the desire to know God. God chose us before we chose God, but prevenient grace is what enables one to respond to accept or reject God.

Reflection Question: What evidence do you see in your own life of God extending grace before you chose to put your faith in God?

Week 3: Day 3 - Romans 6:1b-4

Commentary: Even after becoming Christians, our old lives of sin may still seem tempting. Part of sanctification is continuing to let the Holy Spirit guide us into new ways of living. But the truth is that we will fall back into patterns we have tried to escape. And while God will continue to offer forgiveness and reconciliation, Paul is telling us not to depend on that pattern of sin and forgiveness to live a fruitful life. No, continuing to sin just because we know we will be forgiven is an abuse of grace and is not the key to an abundant relationship with Jesus. Instead, we walk in the newness of life that Jesus has given us – shedding our old patterns and behavior and taking on new ones.

Reflection Question: What pattern of sin do you need to let go of this week? Ask God to help you walk in the newness of life that Jesus has made possible.

Week 3: Day 4 - Titus 2:11-12

Commentary: This scripture from Titus appears in the Revised Common Lectionary as the Christmas reading. It is fitting since Jesus is the one that brought salvation to all. He is the full incarnation of the grace of God. Jesus' life and ministry remind us what grace looks like – patience, forgiveness, acceptance, inclusiveness, second chances, looking out for the poor and marginalized. The grace of God is not only extended as a gift of mercy that brings salvation, but it also brings about a change in behavior – as the scripture says, it trains us to renounce impiety and worldly passions. If we eat McDonald's cheeseburgers all of the time, we may feel satisfied – after all, they are salty and delicious. But if someone offers us a Kobe beef filet, we'd never want to go back to McDonald's burgers. We'd finally know what good beef tasted like, and we would do all that we could to keep eating that beef. In the same way, once we have tasted the grace of God, we don't want to return to lives of impiety – we know how much more abundant our lives are when we live godly and upright lives.

Reflection Question: When have you experienced the grace of God in such a rich way that you realized you had been settling for much less beforehand?

Week 3: Day 5 - John 1:14

Commentary: In this week's reading in Galatians, Paul talks about the "truth of the gospel." He wants to be sure that the people are receiving the true message of God rather than something that has been distorted (as he claims Peter has done with his message). This scripture from the Gospel of John describes Jesus as the absolute truth. Jesus is the source of all that is true, so when we are considering the gospel, we need to remember that the life and words of Jesus have final say.

Reflection Question: What is your favorite teaching of Jesus'? Why? What does that tell you about your understanding of truth and God?