

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
Pastor Troy Schreiner www.victorylutheran.org

Worship Series: *The Church God Wants*
Service Theme: *A Church Willing to Say Hard Things*
Sermon Theme: *Standing Firm for Hard Conversations*
(September 10, 2023) Galatians 2:16-21

First premiering in 2005, the A&E documentary series *Intervention* aired over 330 episodes over 24 seasons. If you never watched the show, each episode of *Intervention* documents someone who is addicted to drugs, or alcohol or both, and whose family is preparing to stage an intervention. At the intervention, the family gives their loved one an ultimatum—either agree to get immediate rehabilitation treatment for the destructive addiction, or risk losing something important— be it family contact, or support, or income.

Isn't it a little surprising that a series could continue for that many seasons and episodes when the basic premise of each episode is always the same? I mean, would you keep watching a sitcom if e episode had the same basic storyline? What's the staying power of a show like *Intervention*? I think it's because interventions always include hard conversations, and hard conversations have the potential for lots of drama! How will the addict respond to the intervention? Will they listen and agree to get help? Or angrily push their family away? What will the family members say to their loved one at the intervention? Will they follow through on their ultimatum if the intervention doesn't work?

While that drama keeps people coming back for more episodes of *Intervention*, the potential drama of having hard conversations also prevents a lot of people from having them, as necessary as they might be. But God tells us today he wants us to be ***A Church Willing to Say Hard Things***. However, he doesn't just tell us to do it. In his Word, he also encourages us and reminds us of our motivation, so we can **Stand Firm for Hard Conversations**.

To help us do that, we'll reflect on a hard conversation the Apostle Paul needed to have during his ministry. He recounts it in his letter to the Christians in the region of Galatia, where he'd started a number of Christian churches on his first missionary journey. Paul writes, ***“When Cephas 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 because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.”***

“Cephas” is another name for Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples, one of the 12 Apostles, and one of the foremost leaders and pillars of the early Christian Church. Which certainly made this a hard conversation for Paul to “oppose Peter to his face!” Imagine needing to confront your boss, or someone who has a lot of power and pull, and that you really respect or admire about something they've done wrong! Those are hard conversations! But what exactly had Peter done wrong?

All the way back in Genesis, God chose the Israelites-- the descendants of Abraham-- to be his special people through whom would come the Savior he'd promised. This separated everyone into two categories—Jews and non-Jews--or “Gentiles.” To keep the Israelites set apart from and uncorrupted by the unbelieving wicked Gentile nations around then, God designed certain laws and commands for his people to follow—laws that governed things like their worship life, their society, even their diet. Actions like circumcision, or the observance of Sabbath days, or the sacrifices they were required to bring to God to atone for their sins.

God's intention for these laws was to remind and point his people ahead to the Savior who would come through them and for them! So, once Jesus came, fulfilled the Law, and sacrificed himself for their sins, those laws were no longer necessary. As Paul writes in Colossians, ***“Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival...or a Sabbath day. These are a***

shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”

Because Jesus paid for the sins of the whole world, all people, both Jews and Gentiles, could be God’s people. As Paul wrote later in Galatians, ***“There is neither Jew nor Greek...for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*** Through Jesus, God no longer wanted Jews and Gentiles to be separated, but to be united as one in Christ!

Most Christians embraced that idea, especially the Apostle Peter, who was one of the first to whom God revealed this intention. But not every Christian did. Paul references ***“certain men who came from James,”*** that is, Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, where Jesus’ half-brother James was the leader of the Christian church. Some of these Jewish Christians, including those who belonged to “the circumcision group,” believed that along with believing in Jesus as Savior, it was also still necessary to perform those old Jewish customs and practices. In their minds, faith plus these actions would make you pleasing to God. While they might have been well-intentioned, these Jewish Christians were unnecessarily burdening the consciences of Gentile believers, and ultimately shifting the focus off of Jesus as Savior, and onto mankind’s works!

Rather than opposing such false teaching, Peter got peer pressured into hypocrisy. He used to eat with and spend time around his Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ. But now, under the watchful eye of these Jewish Christians, Peter separated himself from the Gentiles, as if they were second-class Christians. By doing so, Peter was giving the impression that the Gentile Christians were only worthy of God’s love by “Judaizing themselves.” Peter’s hypocrisy was negatively affecting the Gospel message, the Gentiles Christians, and even Paul’s close missionary companion, Barnabas. Paul knew he had to stand firm for a hard conversation!

And he’s not alone. Today’s Scripture readings show that God also wants us to be willing to say hard things and have hard conversations, confronting people with the truth when they’re caught up in what God calls sin, and spiritually drifting into unbelief. I guarantee we all know

people like that. Maybe it’s your child, grandchild, parent, or extended family member; a friend, neighbor, co-worker, or fellow church member.

But like we said, those are hard conversations! Because no one likes having their sins or their weaknesses pointed out to them. Especially because God’s truth contradicts all the lies our sinful nature tells us to reassure us that our sins are just fine. And when someone challenges the lies we believe, people quickly get angry, defensive, or shut down.

So along with those hard conversations comes a lot of potential drama! What will the relationship fallout be if I have that hard conversation with them? What if they never talk to you again? And because of that potential fallout, it’s far easier to play ostrich, burying our heads in the sand and pretending we don’t notice. Or telling ourselves, “Someone else will address it,” or “It’s no big deal,” or “it won’t make a difference anyways, so why bother? At least we’ll still maintain a good relationship with them!”

But God doesn’t want a church full of ostriches. He wants us to be a church willing to say hard things and have hard conversations! And Paul’s approach to this hard conversation with Peter gives us a lot of insight on how we can better do that!

First, note that Paul says, ***“I opposed [Peter] to his face.”*** What’s the opposite of that? Talking behind someone’s back. Paul could have started the rumor mill, whispering the news about Peter’s hypocrisy all over the church, desecrating his character in the name of the truth, while conveniently dodging the tense confrontation. It certainly feels easier and safer to talk behind someone’s back rather than having a hard conversation face to face. But what good would that have accomplished for the church? And what good would it have accomplished for Peter? That’s why Jesus gives the same direction in today’s Gospel. ***“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you.”***

Second, having hard conversations requires a spirit of humility. Paul wasn’t confronting Peter’s hypocrisy and sin because he wanted to

prove how much better and holier he was. Paul's the same man who calls himself, ***"the greatest of sinners,"*** and ***"the least of the Apostles."*** If we confront people's sin with feelings of superiority, we'll inevitably look down on them, as if their sin is worse than ours; as if you're more deserving of God's love than them. Which will lead us to view other sinners with disgust and disdain, rather than loving concern! But with a spirit of humility, we confront them about their sin while understanding that we're also sinners who need to be regularly confronted with God's law, and regularly comforted with the God's Gospel. Such humility allows us to have the necessary hard conversation motivated by love.

That's the all-important requirement for having hard conversations—we need to be motivated by love for that person's soul! Paul confronted Peter with his hypocrisy in a public way, because the impression he was giving was putting people's spiritual welfare at stake! As Paul recounts, he opposed Peter, ***"When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel."*** As Paul and the other Christians knew so well, because it's what Jesus had taught them, ***"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."***

Because our motivation needs to be love for their eternal soul, we confront people when their lives and actions don't line up with God's truth and are jeopardizing their eternity. But it's certainly possible to stand firm on God's truth, without showing any loving care for the person. At the same time, it's also not possible to love someone without telling them the truth. American pastor Warren Wiersbe once said, ***"Truth without love is brutality, and love without truth is hypocrisy."*** That's why Paul encourages us of the need to ***"speak the truth in love."*** To stand firm on God's truth, but to do so out of love for that person.

Ultimately, whether we're willing to have these hard conversations with people always comes down to love. Which do you love more? This person and their eternal soul? Or ourselves? We easily convince

ourselves that it's more loving for us to hold our tongues and avoid the conversation. We tell ourselves we can't do anything that could cause relational fallout, because we love that person too much. But is it really loving to avoid saying something to someone caught up in sin or unbelief that's leading them to hell? Isn't a fear of relational fallout that prevents us from having hard conversations born out of a love for ourselves and the continuity of our circumstances?

Because God calls the church to minister to sinners, we shouldn't be surprised when this is a regular aspect of our ministry. That's why we have a Member Care Committee, who ministers by reaching out to church members who've drifted from God's Word and Sacraments, and are neglecting their spiritual lives. Out of love for their eternal soul, we're called by God to reach out in love! So please, if you're ever contacted by Victory's Member Care committee, or your pastor, who express concern for your spiritual walk with God, understand that it comes from a place of loving care, not a place of anger or judgment! So instead of being indignant, angry, or shutting down, understand that even spiritual pillars like Peter and Barnabas needed to be called to repentance. Are we unable to fall? Are we above needing such spiritual encouragement and reminders in our lives too?

But here's the thing. Jesus hasn't just made that the job of the church's leadership. If you read through Jesus' direction in Matthew 18, it's the individual believer who first speaks to the person face to face; then again with the help of another person before the church would be brought into the situation at all! So God wants all of us to be a church willing to say hard things!

Those conversations are hard. But they're necessary! And so we ask God to give us the courage to speak, the words to say, and loving motivation, so we can stand firm when we need to have hard conversations. Because our desire in having those hard conversations is to have the most beautiful conversation—the opportunity to point repentant people to the truth that they're forgiven for their sin, and saved not by their actions—but through faith in Jesus their Savior. Out of love for their soul, and out of love for him who saved us by his

grace, let's be a church willing to say hard things, so we can be a church that gets to say the most beautiful thing.