

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin
Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 15
September 6, 2026
Sermon by Pastor Daniel Gensmer
Who's gonna tell Peter? (Galatians 2:11-16)

¹¹But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly wrong. ¹²For before some people came from James, he ate with the Gentiles. But when those people came, he drew back and separated himself, because he feared those from the circumcision group. ¹³And the rest of the Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴But when I saw that they were not acting according to the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of all of them, "If you, a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, why do you compel the Gentiles to live like the Jews?"

¹⁵"We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners. ¹⁶We know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. So we also believed in Christ Jesus that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.

So, with all the AI out there in the world today, it's a real challenge on occasion to figure out what is real. You scroll through video after video online with people commenting "AI slop" because algorithms and data centers churn out videos in minutes that appear flawlessly unnatural.

Now, I am not trying to make a statement that AI is good or bad. What I am trying say is that when everything around us is curated to perfection, there is something strangely valuable about discovering something authentically flawed and perfectly imperfect. We crave something that connects to our human experience, and that is what struck me about Peter as I was reading through the Sermon Text for today.

Peter is incredibly real, human, and relatable. Peter isn't this greater-than-life character that pops off the pages as if he has impenetrable faith and flawless

morals. Time and again, we see Peter do something bold and then get himself into trouble.

- Peter boldly stepped out of the boat to walk to Jesus on the water... he sinks.
- Last week we heard Peter try to rebuke Jesus as if that was a good idea, and Jesus called him Satan in return.
- Peter promised to die for Jesus, and hours later he denied knowing him three separate times.
- Peter once drew a sword to defend Jesus and chopped a dude's ear off, and Jesus fixed the situation by telling him to put the sword away as he reattached the ear.

You see, Peter is just... relatable. Maybe you never tried to walk on water or chop a dude's ear off, but Peter is one of those people in the Bible who feels remarkably relatable. Peter is just plain human. He's bold. He's imperfect. He's passionate. Because in the Bible, Peter is pretty much just this ordinary guy, who does ordinary guy things, with a little more gusto and confidence than he deserves.

And maybe that's why Peter is so useful for us. Because when we look at Peter, we're not just looking at some Apostle who lived two thousand years ago. We're looking at a sinner. And we are looking at ourselves. So, when we get to what happened with Peter today, there's a question worth asking: "**Who's Gonna Tell Peter?**"

You see, Peter's boldness wasn't truly an issue. The fact that Peter was bold was a tremendous blessing because, as the Church was finding its footing after Jesus ascended to heaven, there was a massive controversy between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. And it all came down to this... "What does it mean now that Jesus has fulfilled in the Old Testament Ceremonial Laws?"

Did the Gentile Christians need to eat kosher like the Jews? Did they need to be circumcised like the Jews? And mind you, this wasn't just a casual Church conversation; this was a whole council meeting that was called to figure out what the truth of the Gospel was.

And in Acts 15 we see Peter's boldness spring into action in a magnificent way. He stood before the council and declared, "**God made a choice among you, that through my mouth the Gentiles would hear the**

message of the gospel and believe... He also showed that there is no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. And then Peter get's even more bold and direct... **"We believe that we are saved in the same way they are—through the grace of our Lord Jesus."**

Peter knew the Gospel. Peter understood that Jesus had fulfilled the ceremonial laws and that Jewish and Gentile Christians stood on the same ground before God. Not because they ate kosher. Not because they were circumcised. Not because they kept the right laws. But because Jesus saves sinners by grace. And Peter had been bold enough to say that publicly.

But then we get to Galatians 2, and we see Peter's boldness for the Gospel peter out. Paul says, **"But when Cephas (another name for Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was CLEARLY WRONG."** Wow, Peter was "CLEARLY WRONG." That's a strong statement, Paul! So, how was Peter CLEARLY WRONG?

Well, before these men from the circumcision group arrived. Peter was eating with the Gentiles. He treated these Gentile Christians as brothers and sisters in Christ, because the Old Testament Ceremonial Laws didn't separate them anymore. But then these men from the Circumcision group came, and Peter's attitude changed.

Peter drew back. He separated himself. Peter gave the cold shoulder to the Gentiles and became a total hypocrite, because he rejected the very Gospel freedom he had boldly defended back in Jerusalem.

And why? Because Paul tells us that Peter was afraid. Afraid of what those circumcision men might think. And suddenly the man who boldly proclaimed, **"we are saved in the same way they are... through the grace of Jesus,"** was acting as though some Christians were a little more acceptable than others.

And the crazy part is, is that Peter didn't have to stand up and deny Jesus three times like he had done before. Peter didn't have to preach a sermon about how Jesus wasn't enough, and that in reality they truly did need to go back to all those old Ceremonial Laws. No, Peter simply moved from one table to another table. He changed seats. And his actions preached a sermon for

him. And people listened. The Jews joined Peter in his hypocrisy. Even Barnabas, Paul's trusty sidekick in the ministry, was carried away in Peter's hypocrisy.

And Paul saw what was going on. Paul saw the sermon Peter's actions were preaching. And Paul saw the impact this message was having on the people. So in verse 14 Paul makes an observation. **"I saw that they were not acting according to the truth of the Gospel."** Peter's actions were like footsteps on a beach. And Paul could see clearly that they were not leading to the truth of the Gospel.

And people were following. It wasn't just Peter. It was the other Jews. It was Barnabas too. That's what made Peter's actions, his footsteps, so dangerous. Because he wasn't just snubbing a few people over dinner, but Peter's footsteps were teaching everybody else where they should go.

So, **Who's Gonna Tell Peter?** Peter was clearly wrong. His footsteps were visible. And other people were following him! Somebody needed to tell Peter.

Was it the Gentiles? No, they were the ones being hurt by Peter's sin. What about the Jews? – Nope. Barnabas? Gone right down the same path Peter's footsteps were going.

Well, somebody needed to tell Peter that he was walking away from the very Gospel he knew to be true. **And Paul did.** He opposed Peter to his face. But notice where Paul takes Peter. He doesn't say, "Wow Peter, messing it all up like you usually do, it's time to shape up and be a better apostle!" He doesn't say, "Peter, you gotta try harder." No Paul takes Peter right back to the Gospel.

"We are not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ."

And that is where Peter becomes uncomfortably relatable. Because Peter knew the Gospel, he knew the fact that they were saved by grace through faith just as he had boldly proclaimed in Jerusalem. But even though Peter knew better, his actions didn't match up with this reality.

And if we're honest. What we know to be true so often doesn't match up with how we behave.

We know that Christ died for every sinner. But maybe our actions indicate that there are certain demographics, political affiliations, or sinful situations that are slightly less welcome than others, as if there is an unspoken Lutheran Litmus test?

We know our standing before God has nothing to do with our works, but we can't help shaping up to put on our "best act" at church and with strangers because their opinions of us matter more than those of our God.

That's what Peter was doing. And that's what makes Peter so relatable. Because maybe you're not switching seats at the dinner table, or glowering at the visitors at church today. But our actions convey a message. Whose approval are you chasing? Who do you quietly look down on? Who is it that you have trouble seeing as someone Jesus died for? Where do your actions contradict the Gospel we confess with our mouth?

Because here is the uncomfortable truth... If the subtle actions we make every week were the measure by which we could tell how God accepts us. We would be in a whole world of hurt. Because if we had to recall every wandering step we took and unkind word we expressed, those actions would not tell a very good story.

We are a church full of Peters, from the Pastors to the people in the pews. And us Peters need to know, "**Who's gonna tell Peter?**" Well, Paul does as he declares to you today, "**We are not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Jesus Christ.**"

Remember where your salvation comes from. It comes from Jesus, not the subtle actions that contradict the Gospel you hear every week. Jesus' actions, his footsteps, don't look like ours. While our footsteps through life wander from the truth of the Gospel, Jesus' footsteps moved him toward the sinners he loves. He took every sinful step we've taken – the steps that were motivated by fear, judgement, and a desperate desire for somebody else's approval. Jesus carried it all. Jesus paid for it all. That's the Gospel Peter needed to hear. And that's the Gospel you need to hear.

Your footsteps don't determine whether God will accept you. Jesus' footsteps do. Your footsteps don't lead you into God's family; Jesus make you his family by grace.

So, "**Who's Gonna Tell Peter?**" – All the Peters here at Emmanuel? Jesus does. And here's what he says: "You are not justified by the works of the law. You are justified through faith in Jesus Christ." Your salvation isn't found in how well you walk. It's found in where Jesus walked for you. And he walked all the way to the cross. You are forgiven. You are his. Your place in God's family isn't determined by how perfectly you walk. It's determined by how Jesus walked for you.