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Galatians 6:11-18

Sunday, May 21, 2023

Text

¹¹ See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. ¹² It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. ¹³ For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. ¹⁴ But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ¹⁵ For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. ¹⁶ And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

¹⁷ From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.

Prayer

Introduction

Ben and Jackee had searched and searched for the missing envelope. They had practically torn their house apart trying to find it¹.

The couple from Holladay, Utah had saved up all year to buy football season tickets for the Utah Utes. The envelope had \$1,060, but now they couldn't find it.

¹<https://www.deseret.com/2018/10/5/20655263/utah-couple-s-missing-money-tale-goes-viral-after-2-year-old-shreds-1-060-of-family-s-savings-for-ut>

Sometimes when you're looking for something, you have to start to think outside the box and check the unlikeliest places.

Finally Jackee checked a bin where they kept junk mail, old magazines, and shredded documents. And finally, after all of their searching, at last, she had found the money.

In pieces.

Their two year old son Leo had ran the cash through the paper shredder. More on them later.

Series context

We are concluding our series in Galatians this morning.

In this book, Paul has talked about grace and law. He's talked about people who tried to add law onto the gospel. He's talked about the great covenant the Lord made with Abraham, and how the Lord declared Abraham righteous because of his faith. Paul has talked about his own life and Spiritual journey and the redemption that he himself found through Jesus.

He's talked about the Spiritual work that the Lord does in a believer, freedom in Christ, and the fruit of the Spirit.

But as this letter winds down, Paul will one more time talk about the thing that has been the heart of every verse of this letter: the gospel message, and the savior of the world who offers forgiveness and redemption.

Thesis

Our main idea today is that we are to boast in the cross, not in the flesh.

And we'll be looking at our passage in three parts. The false gospel, the true gospel, and the new creation.

The false gospel

Looking at the beginning of our passage.

Verse 11:

¹¹ See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.

Paul is the author of Galatians. But up until this point of the book, he has not been the penman of Galatians.

Paul dictated to a scribe - or secretarial person - who actually did the physical writing of this letter.

At least up until this last section.

And imagine if you had the first copy of Galatians. You're reading this great letter from Paul.

And suddenly the handwriting totally changes, and it's written in huge letters.

Paul is most likely writing in larger letters for emphasis as he closes Galatians.

He really wants to get their attention as he combats these false teachings which have permeated these churches.

Verses 12-13:

¹² It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. ¹³ For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.

Paul begins this section by bringing up the false teachings which had permeated these Galatian churches.

And in these first couple of verses, he gives three motivations for why people had tried to add works of the law onto the gospel of grace.

First, there were people who still believed that the Old Testament law needed to be followed. It's the idea that we could earn forgiveness or favor with God based on our obedience.

This is an idea which Paul talks about at length earlier in this letter.

In chapter 2, Paul had talked about two of the specific areas of Old Testament law that this group had tried to impose. Dietary restrictions and circumcision requirements.

And so he'll bring up circumcision again in this passage as an example of legalistic additions to the gospel that are no longer required for God's people.

Paul says:

It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised

They have taken God's grace and treated it as if it's something that we can work to achieve.

But the issue is that we cannot fix the problem of our own sin. Because we continue to be sinful people. We cannot atone for our past sins, and we also can't atone for the sins we continue to commit.

And so earlier in Galatians Paul had said in chapter 2, verse 16:

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.

And he continues to expound upon this idea.

Galatians 3:5:

Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith

Galatians 3:10:

all who rely on works of the law are under a curse

And so the issue is that people were leading these Galatian Christians astray with a false gospel.

A second problematic motivation for adding law onto gospel is found in the second part of verse 12:

only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

We don't know this exact situation as well as we'd like. But it appears that there were some who might not have actually believed that the law was necessary, but who tried to impose it out of their own fears.

In the eyes of many, the early Christian movement was another Jewish denomination. And so to keep from rocking the boat too much, and to avoid any issues for the Christian community, some wanted to be more similar in practice to other Jewish groups.

It's a temptation that is understandable. But the problem is that they were losing the gospel in the process.

Throughout church history, there have sadly been bloody skirmishes.

Protestants and Catholics have fought wars.

Next Sunday, we're doing baptisms. When the believer's baptist movements became more prominent in the 16th century, there were believer's baptists who faced intense persecution, up to execution by drowning. This persecution came from other Protestants.

America's founding was by English separatists who were not part of the Church of England and fled so that they could have the freedom to live out their faith, apart from the authority of the Church of England².

Not in terms of a matter of life and death, but I think about the founding of this church 50 years ago. That came at a cost for many. It caused rifts in families. It would have been so much easier to stay.

But you can't stay at the expense of truth.

But it's hard. It's easier to go along to get along.

And so in churches, in society, in our culture, whenever the truth of the Bible cuts against the grain, and when it can be easy to compromise, or to back down from what we believe, or to disregard what the Bible teaches, let us instead walk by faith as we share truth in a world of falsity.

The third issue is a little bit complicated.

Verse 13:

For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.

Paul says that some of these proponents don't actually follow the law, yet they want to boast in getting others to follow the law.

That's kind of a confusing idea.

I think Frank Thielman is probably right when he suggests that these false teachers gained something from people following them³. Honor. Reputation.

Even if these leaders didn't fully believe it or adhere to it themselves, that if they were getting others to strictly follow the law, it made these leaders look good.

² <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/mayflower-departs-england>

³ Frank Thielman, "[Galatians](#)," in *Romans–Galatians*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. X, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 648.

That might sound absurd, but I sometimes feel like many churches today aren't so far away from that. It's one of the problems of legalism.

We turn faith and good works into a competition. We might not say it in those terms, but there can be a kind of pride in how much better we're doing, how much more we have it together.

And so in the Galatian churches, while some - and I stress some - of these leaders might not have really cared all that much about these laws, they cared about the outward appearance and of the people they were leading being seen as especially devoted to following the law.

We come to our second point.

The true gospel

So in verse 13, you have those who want to boast in the flesh.

Verse 14, Paul says:

¹⁴ But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Again, these are the closing verses of this book.

And THIS is what matters.

It's the cross. It's the gospel. It's the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This week, two very well known pastors both died.

Dr. Harry Reeder was one of the most influential pastors in the Presbyterian Church in America. He died suddenly on Thursday in a car accident at the age of 75. He had also served as the pastor of Briarwood, the founding church of the Presbyterian Church in America.

He was Kari's family's pastor when she was growing up, first in Charlotte, where her dad founded a school through their church. And several years later, they followed Harry to Birmingham.

Harry Reeder was a monumental figure in the Presbyterian Church.

On Friday, Tim Keller, one of the most popular and influential pastors of this generation died in New York from pancreatic cancer at the age of 72.

These are men who influenced thousands, maybe millions. Men who had ministry's that will be talked about long into the future. Men who had a global influence.

But life is still fragile and finite.

For both of these men, for all of their brilliance and gifts, and influence, the significance and why both of these men will be in God's presence a thousand, ten thousand, ten millions years from now is because they believed in a living savior who takes away the penalty of sins.

And that's the only thing that will matter for you or me.

It's not about how good we are, how lovable we are, how smart we are, how special we think we are.

far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Boast in the cross, not in works. That is what our faith is all about. That a dead world has a living savior.

I want to talk for a moment about this idea of boasting in the cross.

When you do that, you're not focusing on yourself. You're focusing on what Jesus has done.

It's an interesting idea. I think we can lose sight of how radical this statement would have been in the first century. Boasting in the cross?

Crucifixion is not practiced in America. It's not something that's personal to us.

But in the first century Greco-Roman world from which Paul wrote Galatians, crucifixion was the most shameful means of execution that could be inflicted upon a person.

And yet it is through this inglorious means of death. Of being totally stripped and debased, of being totally humiliated and shamed that Jesus accomplished the most glorious victory in atoning for the sins of a fallen world.

Illustration - the 3 confessions

British New Testament scholar N.T. Wright tells a story he heard from an Anglican Bishop about three boys who went into a confessional. And they wanted to play a prank on their priest. But in that, they were making a mockery of the gospel and grace.

The first boy went into the confessional and started confessing to a long and ridiculous list of sins. Things he'd never actually done. But he thought it was funny.

He left laughing.

The second boy did the same thing, and similarly left thinking that what they were doing was so funny.

The priest was wise to their game. When the third boy did the same thing, the priest said:

"You have confessed these sins. Now I want you to do something to show your repentance. I want you to walk up to the far end of the church and I want you to look at the picture of Jesus hanging on the cross, and I want you to look at his face and say, 'You did all that for me and I don't care that much.' And I want you to do that three times."

So the boy walked up and repeated what the priest told him. 'You did all that for me and I don't care that much.'

He did it a second time. 'You did all that for me and I don't care that much.'

On the third time, he was overwhelmed. He started crying.

The cross is a powerful image.

The bishop who told the story said he knew about it because he was that third boy, who all those years before broke down in tears in looking at a cross and being confronted with what Jesus had done for him.

And that is at the very heart of the Christian faith.

In 1 Corinthians 2:2, Paul says:

I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

There were people who wanted to hide from the gospel, who wanted to bury the truth. In Romans 1:16-17, Paul says:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith

The cross is personal. Jesus is a personal savior who died for you if you believe in him, if you accept his grace, if you trust in his salvation, if you place your hope in him.

I heard someone share an observation this week that stuck with me.

Lots of people talk about God, about belief in God.

And we can say that and it can be pretty distant.

But who is Jesus to you?

That's much more personal?

Who is he really?

Is he your Lord? Is he your savior?

Boast in the cross, not in works.

We come to our third point.

The new creation

Verse 15:

¹⁵ For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

Paul goes back to the law and says that it doesn't save you.

People who want to claim Jesus and still rely on the law have gotten it wrong because they've thrown out the gospel. Jesus didn't die so we can earn him.

He died because we could not.

And so living for Christ is not about earning him, it's about knowing him. It's about living for him and for his glory. It's about living as redeemed people who have found true life in Christ.

Jesus didn't die to make you nice. He died to make you new. To make you a new creation. To give you a new life.

That's what matters. A new heart in a new person who has been redeemed by the gospel.

We were dead in sin and could do nothing to make it right.

The missing envelope

I return to the story of the shredded money that I shared in the beginning. Little Leo had destroyed it. It's not like accidentally ripping a bill in half. That can be taped back together. He'd destroyed it.

And no amount of tape was going to fix it.

But all hope was not lost.

They couldn't restore the money, but one more powerful could.

The Bureau of Engraving and Printing. The government has a mutilated currency division. And that destroyed money could be replaced.

The money was irrevocably destroyed, but they could be given new money.

I know that's a silly example, but it's illustrative of a point. That God gives a new life that we cannot give ourselves.

And so the new creation is what matters and it is a result of belief in the gospel, and what Christ has done on the cross.

Prayer

Paul closes this letter with a prayer.

And that's how we'll wind down our time and close out this series.

Verses 16-18. Paul's prayer:

¹⁶ And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

¹⁷ From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.

For the person who is a new creation in Christ, Paul prays for peace and mercy knowing that the only way to receive true peace and true mercy is through a saving relationship with Christ. Paul refers to them as the Israel of God. That is quite the theological statement that Paul drops at the end of this letter.

I take it as Paul is referring to the church as the true people of God.

For the people who wanted to rely on the Old Testament law for their salvation, they were believing in something ineffective. It is the gospel which makes someone God's people.

In verse 17, Paul talks about the marks on his body. He's likely referring to wounds he had previously suffered as a result of his persecution he had faced in preaching the gospel. Years later, he would die for his faith.

And in the end of the passage, as he addresses these Galatian Christians, he calls for Christ's grace.

He takes one last time to remind them of the grace of Christ. This closing is similar to his closing salutations in other letters he wrote.

And that is Galatians.

Conclusion

I'll close with this.

It's where Paul closes.

¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.

I have touched on this multiple times in this series, but Galatians was written to a church who was not going through the best of times.

Some of Paul's letters are pretty upbeat. Philippians is an example of that.

Galatians was to a community who was struggling.

But he hadn't given up. Because Paul still knew that Jesus was a gracious savior and that hope was not lost.

There are so many areas where it's easy to get cynical and where it's easy to be frustrated.

From start to finish, Galatians is Paul's attempt to call these people back to Christ.

Maybe you have someone in your life who is so far from God that you don't think that'll ever change.

Never assume they can't change. Never limit what God can do. Our God is the God of new creations.

It can also be easy to get discouraged by our society and culture. Moral decadence and decay. It's a lost world.

Let's not become preoccupied with our own goodness, but let our boast be in the cross. And may we have hearts of love and compassion for reaching the lost with the gospel of grace.

And so may we interact with those around us, with a world that is lost, not as people who are jaded by the sins that we see but as people who are hopeful in the new creation God brings.