

“The Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ”

The Thirteenth in a Series of Sermons on Galatians

Texts: Galatians 6:11-18; Deuteronomy 21:22-23

We begin to wrap-up our series on the book of Galatians. In this sermon, we will consider Paul’s closing words to the Galatians—expressing his desire to boast only in the cross of Jesus Christ. But Paul’s boast stands in complete contrast to everything we have read so far about the Judaizers, men who were ashamed of Christ’s cross, since crucifixion was regarded by virtually all first century people as a symbol of shame and humiliation. Instead, the Judaizers were boasting that their heretical movement had the blessing of God because of the large number of converts they quickly made. Such a boast about numbers obscured the fact that to be a Judaizer, one must also boast about one’s own righteousness, supposedly attained through law-keeping and submission to ritual circumcision. By boasting about their personal righteousness, sadly, the Judaizers become enemies of Jesus Christ.

In the first six chapters of Galatians (1:1-6:10), Paul address both the doctrinal and practical consequences of the Judaizing heresy. As he completes this remarkable and powerful letter, the Apostle has several final comments to make. In the first part of chapter 6, Paul discussed the principle of “sowing and reaping.” Those who sow to the flesh—those who embrace the false gospel of the Judaizers and who seek to earn favor with God through circumcision and obedience to the ceremonial law—will reap a crop, a crop Paul calls the “fruit of the flesh,” which leads to a harvest of destruction. But those who trust in Jesus Christ’s finished work through faith alone, and who, therefore, “walk in the Spirit,” sow seed to the Spirit. They will manifest the fruit of the Spirit, a harvest which leads to eternal life. Paul’s notion of “sowing and reaping” is tied to believing the true gospel and sowing to the finished work of Christ—not sowing to self-righteousness by trying to earn favor with God through obedience to the Law as the Judaizers were deceptively teaching.

Before we get to Paul’s concluding point—that the Judaizers were trying to avoid persecution by stressing circumcision instead of preaching the cross—Paul slips in a statement about his own health that we ought to briefly address. In verse 11, Paul says “*see with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.*” That Paul is writing in “large letters,” likely means that the illness which originally landed Paul on a sickbed in Galatia some months earlier had to do with his vision. Paul was likely still having trouble with his eyes, so he indicates why it is that he had written out this epistle in such large letters.

The final point Paul raises as he concludes this letter is his discussion of the motivation of the Judaizers in teaching their false gospel. In verses 12-13, Paul charges, “*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. 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.*” Again, Paul deals with these hypocritical false teachers who were trying to make a good impression outwardly (verse 12), but who do not obey the very same law they tell their own converts they must obey (verse 13). Warns Paul, they are trying to compel you to be circumcised—deceiving you into taking back upon yourselves the yoke of the law—when the Judaizers not only don’t keep the law themselves, their motivation in deceiving you has to do with escaping persecution because of the scandal attached to the cross.

The cross of Jesus Christ is stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to Greeks, the very mention of

which was offensive to many. Though the cross be an offense, if there is no cross, there is no gospel. But for the Judaizers, who saw justification as the fruit of human effort (so the cross makes no sense to them) the gospel as taught by Paul must be modified so as to remove the offence. But to remove the offence of the cross was to preach a gospel which was no gospel.

Unlike the Judaizers who were ashamed of the cross, and denied its saving power, Paul desires to boast *only* in the cross of Christ. Why would Paul boast about something which Jews and Greeks living in Galatia regarded as utterly offensive and outside the bounds of polite conversation? Add to this, the fact of the apostle's own life-experience and his very impressive background. Had he so desired, Paul certainly could have found something to other boast about other than a cruel instrument of torture. If there was anyone who had reason for boasting about himself, or his own accomplishments it was the apostle Paul. While the Judaizers were boasting about the number of converts that they had made in Galatia, and claiming that their gospel is the antidote to Paul's supposed antinomianism (indifference to Christian living), Paul's response is to boast about an instrument of shame. Why would he do this?

In Acts 22:3-4, Luke informs us that Paul was trained as a Rabbi under the famous teacher of Rabbis, Gamaliel. Gamaliel is considered by many historians to be one of the greatest teachers in the long history of Judaism.¹ For Paul to have been one of Gamaliel's students would have entitled Paul to a very significant stature in the Judaism of the first century. You would think that with a group such as the Judaizers, Paul could have boasted about his educational background (his Ph.D. in Judaism), reminding them of his own zeal in defending the religion of Israel against this new sect, called "the way."

In addition to his impressive education, Paul was also an apostle. Certainly that would have been worth something in terms of boasting before men! Paul met the most important qualification to be an apostle—he had seen the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ with his own eyes as recounted for us in Acts 9 and Acts 22:6-21. To be called by Jesus to serve as an apostle was a call to the highest possible office to which a follower of Christ may be called. When necessary, but especially when dealing with false teachers who were deceiving the churches through false doctrine, Paul did pull rank, as he does in the opening chapter of this letter. Paul appeals to his apostolic office as the basis for his authority to rebuke those opposing the true gospel. Paul speaks with Christ's authority because his gospel has been given to him by Jesus Christ himself. But Paul does not boast about his authority.

Closely related to this is that Paul might have been able to boast about the fact that Peter, and the other apostles, considered his letters to be on the same footing as the Old Testament. Peter, considered certain writings of Paul to be Scripture (2 Peter 3:16—"*there are some things in [Paul's letters] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures*"). Earlier in Galatians (2:11), Paul had to rebuke Peter for "wimping out" and giving in to the pressures of the Judaizers. Peter had been living as a Gentile, but when the Judaizers caught him with the smell of pork on his breath, Peter caved in and he too began demanding that Gentile converts live like Jews and obey the ceremonial and dietary laws. Paul clearly has the Word of God and the consensus of the church on his side in this matter, as shortly after this epistle was written the Jerusalem Council, described in Acts 15, fully endorsed Paul's gospel. But Paul does not boast to the Galatians that the church and the apostles are on his side—though they were and this is an important point. Paul does not boast about the infallible *magisterium* (the teaching office), nor the consent of the fathers of the church.

¹ ISBE, vol. 2, s.v. "Gamaliel."

Given all that Paul had done and experienced, it is surprising that instead of boasting about these things, the apostle boasts about an instrument of death and shame in verse 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.*” Why would Paul choose to boast about the cross; an instrument of torture reserved only for the worst of criminals and dregs of society? With his impressive resume and his experience of the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, why would Paul boast about the first century equivalent of the electric chair, the gas chamber, the hangman’s noose, or the firing squad? But Galatians is not the only place where Paul speaks of the cross in rather surprising terms. In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes that the cross was foolishness to the Greek and a stumbling block to the Jew. To all of Paul’s contemporaries the cross was scandalous. Why boast about it? As one New Testament scholar reminds us . . .

to believe that the one pre-existent Son of the one true God, the mediator at creation and the redeemer of the world, had appeared in very recent times in out-of-the-way Galilee as a member of the obscure people of the Jews, and even worse, had died the death of a common criminal on the cross, could only be regarded as a sign of madness.²

To those living in the first century, the cross means that our Lord died the death that one would expect of a convicted serial killer, a revolutionary, or a terrorist. Such a message was utterly offensive to a Jew and beyond all comprehension to a Hellenistic Greek or a citizen of Rome. To preach such a gospel in the first century was to preach a shocking and scandalous message indeed.

The scandal associated with the cross arises from the fact that in Paul’s time the cross was known to all as a sign of utter shame and humiliation. Crucifixion was an unspeakably inhumane way to execute criminals. It was described by several writers of the period as “*the infamous stake*”, or the “*criminal wood*”, or the “*terrible cross.*” One executed by crucifixion died in shame and was regarded as an outcast from society.³ Invented by barbarians, and adopted by the Romans, the Greeks considered crucifixion too barbaric for their refined sensitivities and abhorred the practice. Crucifixion was considered so awful Roman citizens were usually exempt from this form of capital punishment. Crucifixion was reserved for slaves, anarchists, violent criminals, or robbers. Crucifixion was Rome’s warning to its subjects – do not mess with us! Yet Jesus offered himself up to die for our sins on the shameful cross.

To Greeks, who viewed their gods as immortal, the cross was, as Paul says elsewhere “*foolishness*” (1 Corinthians 1:18). Not only is the cross a picture of shame and degradation—how could a god be shamed and degraded?—but the Greeks found it difficult at best to believe the notion of a “god dying” in order to redeem others. The cross made no sense to them. To the Jew, however, the cross had completely different connotations. As one writer reminds us,

If the Romans regarded crucifixion with horror, so did the Jews, though for a different reason. They made no distinction between a tree and a cross, and so between a hanging and a crucifixion. They therefore automatically applied to crucified criminals the terrible statement of the law that ‘anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse’ (Deut. 21:23). They could not bring

² Martin Hengel, The Crucifixion (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 7-8.

³ Martin Hengel, The Crucifixion (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 8.

themselves to believe that God's messiah would die under his curse, strung up on a tree.⁴

To a Jew, the cross would remain an intolerable stumbling block. How could the long anticipated Messiah, the one who was to come to redeem God's people and set up an eternal kingdom, die at the hands of their Roman oppressors? According to popular Jewish expectation during the time of our Lord's life and ministry, the Messiah was to be a great king who would restore Israel to her former greatness. How could the Messiah be crucified as a criminal? The cross made little, if any, sense to a Jew. How could the one who would come to save them, *himself* die as a common criminal? How could it be that the conquering Messiah was so utterly defenseless against the Romans? Why would Paul choose to boast about something that would detract from his prestige as an apostle? If he wants people to trust in Jesus, why would he boast about something so repulsive to his audience?

In Galatians 6:13, Paul tells us that the Judaizers took a different approach. They were boasting about the "flesh of their converts." They were boasting about the number of followers they had duped into submitting to circumcision as a way of adding their own merit to the death of Christ. Much like modern Americans who can be talked into almost anything solely on the basis of the fact that "it works," the Judaizers were boasting about how many converts they had made. Apparently they were quite successful in doing so. The message of the Judaizers must be true because so many believed them. It should also not be lost to us that the Judaizers were not preaching an easy message. You must be very committed to the cause if you, as an adult male, were willing to undergo circumcision. This is much more difficult than walking an aisle, or praying a prayer! Yet, because the cross was such an offense, many in the Galatian churches were choosing circumcision over the scandal of the cross.

We might think Paul would reply to his critics by boasting about his personal achievements, his divinely given authority, or his great education. Paul might even have chosen to respond in kind by boasting about all of the converts that he had won to Christ. But Paul resists this. The purpose of the cross is far more important than its popularity. The apostle is concerned with being faithful to that gospel Jesus revealed to him, not to be successful as men count success. Paul had no desire to think in terms of the numbers of followers he might attract by distorting or watering down the impossible demands of God's law, or downplaying the scandal of the gospel to make his message more palatable to non-Christians. Why does Paul state it is his wish that he boast only in something as offensive as the cross?

The answer is very simple. First, the cross of Jesus Christ is the *only* way for sinful men and women to be reconciled to a holy God who is too pure to even look upon sin. While the cross may be foolishness to the Greek, and a stumbling block to the Jew, Paul says the "*word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*" (I Cor. 1:18). Paul has already written that "*Jesus loved me and gave himself for me*" (Galatians 2:19) becoming a curse for us, and in doing so, bore the guilt of our sins in his own body. The cross of Christ reconciles God to us, and us to God. As Paul will later state in Romans 5:10, "*for if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.*" The cross is the only means by which God reconciles sinners unto himself. The cross will always remain an offence to those who seek to stand before God and boast about their accomplishments, righteousness, obedience to God's commandments, or their conformity to external rituals such as circumcision.

Second, the cross turns aside God's anger towards his people. In Romans 3:25, Paul speaks of Jesus as

⁴ John Stott, The Cross of Christ (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986).

the one “*whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.*” A propitiation is a sacrifice which turns aside of God’s anger in regard to our sins. In this we encounter the great mystery that God the Father pours out His own wrath and anger upon His Son, thereby appeasing His anger towards sinners, since Christ bears God’s wrath and anger for them while he suffers upon the cross. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you have full assurance that God’s anger towards your sins has been dealt with. Why? Because the debt you owe for the guilt of your sins has been paid in full. This is true because Christ’s death is sufficient to take away all of the guilt of all of your sins, something the Judaizers were denying. This is why their “different gospel” was really no gospel at all, and why anyone who was teaching such a thing comes under God’s curse.

Third, Christ’s death is also said to be a substitutionary payment for our sins. Paul says Christ has “*died for our sins*” (I Cor. 15:3), was “*delivered over to death for our sins*” (Rom. 4:25) and “*died for us*” (Rom. 5:8). Here, then, is the heart of Christ’s work on the cross. The sinless God-man, Jesus Christ, the lamb of God, dies a substitutionary death for the sinner. Christ dies in the sinner’s place, bearing the sinner’s guilt, which has been imputed to Him. Jesus Christ thereby pays the penalty for the sinner’s own guilt. Only in this manner can the guilt of our sins, which separates the Holy God from sinful men and women, can be removed.

Paul boasts only in the Cross of Christ, because to boast in anything else, is to imply that men and women can be restored to a right relationship to God by some other means than through the sacrificial death and perfect righteousness of Christ. But that is exactly what the Judaizers were arguing, that we are not justified through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Instead, we are justified by faith plus submission to ritual circumcision, the keeping of certain dietary laws, keeping the Jewish religious calendar, and through our obedience to the law of Moses. For Paul, this is the ultimate betrayal of his Lord and a horrible distortion of the very gospel that Christ commissioned him to preach. This is why the Judaizers placed themselves under God’s curse, were severed from Christ, and had fallen from grace.

But Paul also chooses to boast in the cross because the cross of our Lord Jesus is also the pattern for the Christian life, the pattern for those who walk in the Spirit, and who sow to the Spirit, not the flesh. Those who live in light of Christ’s crucifixion are now free to serve one another in love, since the cross is a graphic picture to us that our righteousness is never greater than another’s—as the Judaizers were teaching—and so sowing the seeds of dissension and division tearing the church apart.

Paul speaks of one cross, but two crucifixions. Christ been crucified to remove the curse, and through the cross, says Paul, “*the world has been crucified to me.*” United to Jesus in the likeness of his death through faith, Paul realizes the world will reject him just as the world rejected his Lord, crucifying the Lord of glory. If the issue is popularity and the avoidance of persecution is the goal, the cross is not the answer. To seek to boast in it is simply foolish. The self-righteous, such as the Judaizers, see the cross as either foolishness or a stumbling block. They cannot comprehend the fact that this is the only way God can justify sinners. To be crucified with Christ, is to be identified with an instrument of shame and degradation. To be crucified with Christ, means that we are identified with an instrument of scandal.

Paul also states that not only has the world been crucified to him, but adds that I have been “*crucified to the world.*” Paul does not deny the importance of the world as the theater of redemption, or even identify the material world with evil as Greek mystery religions which gave birth to Gnosticism would do. But the apostle does renounce the standards of the world, the values of the world and his intellectual identification with the way the world thinks about matters of sin and grace. Paul is renouncing the “basic

principles of the world” championed by modern Judaizers who teach that people reach heaven by “being good,” and avoid hell by not doing anything terrible.

When all is said and done, Paul can say in verse 15, “*neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.*” For Paul, circumcision has value only when seen as the sign and seal of the righteousness that is reckoned to us through faith, as the sign of God’s favor under the covenant of grace. But in Galatia, circumcision doesn’t mean a thing when someone influenced by a Judaizer sees a surgical procedure as a means of earning a justifying righteousness. In this case, circumcision means nothing! Neither is it true that a Gentile who has never heard of such a thing, is prevented from being justified by the merits of Jesus Christ because they have not undergone the ritual cutting of the flesh. For Paul, what counts is the “new creation.” Through faith in Jesus Christ, both Jew and Gentile, participate in the restoration of all things that has been brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, irrespective of the presence or lack of circumcision. We participate in the new creation when we are united to Jesus Christ by faith, and when we die with him in his sacrificial death. But we also rise with him in newness of life to walk in the Spirit. This participation in the new creation comes through faith alone, is accomplished by the power of God’s Spirit, culminating in eternal life. This is what counts, not whether we are or are not circumcised.

Finally, in verse 16, Paul quickly concludes this letter and sends his greetings, “*and as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.*” Those who do not trust in circumcision to justify, but who trust in the cross of Jesus Christ know he is their only hope of heaven. Paul speaks of the church—those who follow this rule—as the “*Israel of God.*” In verse 15, Paul made it absolutely clear that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything. What counts is a new creation. It is difficult to believe in the very next verse Paul would suddenly divide the people of God into two distinct groups, Jew and Gentile, as our dispensational friends teach.

The true “Israel of God,” refers to those same people who participate in the new creation, namely those who walk in the Spirit, and for whom Christ has died to remove the curse. It is clear from a statement such as this, all those who trust in Jesus Christ, whether they be Jew or Gentile, are participants in the new creation, which is the true “Israel of God.” This is Paul’s final shot at the Judaizers, who are now regarded as apostates who have fallen from grace. The true Israel of God is comprised of those who have been crucified with Christ and indwelt by the Spirit of God. While he is at it, Paul puts them on notice in verse 17, “*from now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.*” The man who is scarred from head to toe from being nearly stoned to death for preaching the gospel, has seen the strong hand of God deliver him many times before. Because Paul fears God, he is afraid of no man! His final words are an extension of Christ’s blessing to his people: “*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.*”

Why should we, like Paul, seek to boast only in the cross of Jesus Christ? The reason why the cross must be central in the teaching and preaching of Christ’s church is very, very, simple. The cross of Christ is our only hope of heaven. Though it be foolishness to the Greek and a stumbling block to the Jew, it is the power of God for those who are being saved. As Gentiles, who were formerly strangers to the promise, aliens, without God and without hope in the world, we have now been brought near to God by the blood of the cross. As members of the New Israel, we too participate in all the blessings of the new creation, because our standing before God does not depend upon a surgical procedure, nor upon what we eat or drink, nor upon the calendar we use, nor upon our obedience to the law of Moses, despite what modern Judaizers tell us. Rather, says Paul, we are justified by the merits of Jesus Christ, received through faith alone, apart from works! In the new creation there is a full and final forgiveness of sin, as

well as the imputation of perfect Christ's righteousness to all of God's people who even now struggle with the flesh as the Spirit brings forth his fruit in our lives. In the new creation, we are clothed with Christ through baptism, and we feed upon our savior's blessed body—heavenly manna—through faith. Through faith in Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are children of Abraham and heirs to the glorious inheritance that God has promised to all who trust in the death and righteousness of Jesus Christ, instead of their own. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we are free from the guilt of our sins, free from the yoke of the Law. We are free from those who seek to enslave our consciences to those things from which Christ died to free us—the basic principles of the world. It is for this reason that we must stand firm against anyone who seeks to preach another gospel or to bind our consciences to such things as “do not taste, do not touch, do not handle.” All of this comes to us because Jesus Christ died upon Calvary's scandalous tree, and shed his precious blood for us. How can we boast in anything else?

Beloved, all of these unspeakable privileges and promises are ours. The same Savior who loved us and gave himself for us, comes to us through Word and Sacrament. We have heard his promise to save all who trust him. Jesus bids us to come and join him at his table. Here is freedom from the curse of the law and bondage to sin. Here is where we sow to the Spirit and bear fruit that leads to life everlasting. Here is where we come in peace and confidence and cry “Abba, Father.” Here is where the weakest, struggling sinner finds rest and renewal and the forgiveness of sins. What foolishness it is to boast in our own righteousness, or seek favor with God through any other means when all that we need is here. Let it be our prayer this morning, “may we never boast, except in the cross of Jesus Christ!” What counts is a new creation, and all of its blessings—the very blessings of heaven itself which are ours this morning when we too seek to boast in the scandal of Christ's cross. Amen!