

“May I Never Boast”

Text: Galatians 6:11-18

We now wrap-up our series on the book of Galatians, and we do so, by looking at Paul’s remarkable assertion about his desire to boast only in the cross of Jesus Christ. This stands in utter contrast to the Judaizers, who were ashamed of Christ’s cross, since crucifixion was regarded as a sign of shame and humiliation. The Judaizers were boasting about their own righteousness, supposedly attained through law-keeping and submission to ritual circumcision, and in doing so, they became enemies of Jesus Christ and his gospel.

Paul has now concluded both the doctrinal and the practical sections of this letter, and before he completes this great letter, the apostle has several final comments to make. Last week, you will recall, we worked our way through Paul’s discussion in which he set out the principle of “sowing and reaping.” Those who sow to the flesh—that is, 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 indeed reap a crop, a crop called the fruit of the flesh, which leads to a harvest of destruction. But those who trust in Christ’s finished work through faith alone, and who, therefore, “walk in the Spirit,” sow seed to the Spirit, and in doing so, will manifest the fruit of the Spirit, producing a crop which leads to eternal life. The key element in Paul’s notion of “sowing and reaping” is believing the true gospel and sowing to the finished work of Christ, and not sowing to self-righteous efforts to earn favor with God through obedience to the Law as the Judaizers were deceptively teaching.

Therefore, let us turn our attention to the conclusion of this great epistle, Galatians 6:11-18:

11 See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand! 12 Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. 13 Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh. 14 May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. 15 Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. 16 Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God. 17 Finally, 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.

Before we get to Paul’s concluding point—which is that the Judaizers were trying to avoid persecution by stressing circumcision instead of preaching the cross—Paul slips in a statement that we ought to briefly address. This has to do with Paul’s comments about his own health. In verse 11, Paul speaks of writing in “large letters,” a point that many have taken to indicate that the illness which originally landed Paul on a sickbed in Galatia some months earlier had to do in part with his vision. Since Paul was likely still having trouble with his eyes, he indicates why it is that he had written out this epistle in such large letters.

The main point raised by Paul at the end of this letter, and with which we must deal as we wrap up, is the apostle’s discussion of the motivation of the Judaizers in teaching false gospel set out in verses 12-13. Paul once again deals with these hypocritical false teachers who were trying to make a good impression outwardly—verse 12—but who themselves do not obey the very same law they tell their own converts

that 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, but that their motivation in deceiving you has to do with escaping persecution because of the stigma attached to the cross. For the cross of Jesus Christ is both a stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to Greeks, the very mention of which was offensive to many. For Paul, 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—since the cross was such an offense—the gospel as taught by Paul should be modified so as to remove the offence. But to remove the offence was to destroy the gospel.

Thus, unlike the Judaizers who were ashamed of the cross, and who denied its saving efficacy, Paul makes clear that it is his desire to boast only in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though it is very easy to overlook this point, this is really an amazing assertion. Why would Paul boast about something that many of those Jews and Greeks living in Galatia would have 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, Paul certainly could have found something to boast about other than a cruel instrument of torture had he so desired. 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, Paul's response is to boast about an instrument of shame. Why would he do this? Some background here is important.

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 entire annals of Judaism.¹ For Paul to have been one of Gamaliel's students, would in and of itself 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, 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 had met the most important qualification to be an apostle—he had seen the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, events recounted for us in Acts 9 and Acts 22:6-21. To be called by Christ Himself to serve as an apostle was a divine calling to the highest possible office to which a follower of Christ may be called. And when necessary, especially when dealing with false teachers, or the so-called silver-tongued "super-apostles" who were deceiving the churches through false doctrine, Paul on occasion did pull rank—as he does here in the opening chapter of the Galatian letter—and use his apostolic office as the basis for his authority to rebuke those opposing the true gospel. Paul speaks with authority because his gospel has been given him by Jesus Christ himself. But Paul does not boast about his authority.

Closely related to this is the fact that Paul might have been able to boast about the fact that Peter, and the other Apostles, considered his apostolic letters to be on the same footing as the Old Testament—Peter, for one, considered certain writings of Paul to be Scripture (2 Peter 3:16). Remember, earlier in Galatians 2:11, Paul tells us that he 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 Peter with the smell of pork on his breath, Peter caved into them and he too began demanding that new Gentile converts live

¹ ISBE, vol. 2, s.v. "Gamaliel".

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 is not a Roman Catholic and does not boast about the infallible magisterium of the church, nor the consent of the fathers.

It is very surprising, therefore, given all that Paul had done and experienced, that instead of boasting about these things, the apostle expresses his desire in no uncertain terms—“*may I never boast about anything, except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” 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? Galatians is not the only place where Paul speaks of the cross in rather surprising terms. In 1 Corinthians, Paul later writes that the cross was foolishness to the Greek and a stumbling block to the Jew. Why does he say this? 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 indicates that our Lord died the death that one would expect of a convicted serial killer, or a revolutionary, or a terrorist. Such a message was utterly offensive to a Jew and beyond all comprehension to a Hellenistic Greek and a citizen of Rome. To preach such a gospel in the first century was to preach a most surprising and shocking message indeed.

The shock and scandal associated with the cross comes 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*”, the “*criminal wood*”, the “*terrible cross.*” Simply stated, the 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 generally considered crucifixion too barbaric for their refined sensitivities and they abhorred the practice. Crucifixion was considered so repulsive to the Romans, that Roman citizens were usually exempt from this form of capital punishment. Crucifixion was a means of execution that was reserved for slaves, anarchists, violent criminals and robbers.

Accordingly, to the 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—and how could 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 simply made no sense to them. To the Jew however, the cross had completely different connotations. As John Stott points out in his excellent book [The Cross of Christ](#),

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

³ Hengel, [The Crucifixion](#), p. 8.

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

To the Jew then, the cross would remain an intolerable stumbling block. How could the long anticipated Messiah, the one who was to come both 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, not a crucified criminal. Thus 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 Roman occupation of their land? Why then, would Paul choose to boast about something that would detract from his overall prestige as an apostle and why on earth would he boast about something that was so unpopular as to actually be repulsive to his audience?

In Galatians 6:13, Paul tells us that the Judaizers were actually boasting about the “flesh of their converts”—that is, 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, and apparently they were quite successful in doing this. 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! And yet, because the cross was such an offense, many in the Galatian churches were choosing circumcision over the scandal of the cross, in spite of the difficulties.

It is only natural to think that Paul might 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—because for him, the meaning of the cross is far more important than its popularity. The apostle is concerned with being faithful to Christ and his apostolic calling, not successful as men count things. Thus he has no desire to think in terms of the numbers of followers he might attract by distorting or watering down the awesome demands of the Law and the sweetness of the gospel to make his message more palatable to non-Christians. Why then, does Paul state that it is his wish that he boast only in something as offensive as the cross?

The answer is very simple—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 that the cross “*is the power of God for those who are being saved*” (I Cor. 1:17-18). Here in Galatians, Paul has already said that “*Jesus loved us and gave himself for us,*” becoming a curse for us, and in doing so, bore the guilt of our sins in his own body. In doing this, the cross of Christ both reconciles God to us, and us to God. As Paul will later state in Romans 5:10, “*when we were God’s enemies we were reconciled to Him through the death of His son.*” The cross is, therefore, the only means by which God seeks to reconcile sinners unto himself. But this

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

also means that cross will always remain an offence to all those who seek to stand before God and boast about their accomplishments and righteousness, and conformity to external ritual such as circumcision.

Second, according to Paul, the cross turns aside God's anger towards his people. In Romans 3:25, Paul declares that "*God, presented Him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement,*" or better, as a "propitiation," or a "turning aside of God's anger," in regard to our sins. Here, we are told of the great mystery, whereby, 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—the debt you owe for the guilt of your sins has been paid in full. And 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 the "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. For Paul, 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. In other words, Christ dies in the sinner's place, bearing the sinner's guilt, which has been imputed to Him, and Jesus Christ thereby pays the penalty for the sinner's own guilt. Thus, only in this manner can the guilt of our sins, which separates the Holy God from sinful men and women as a ocean divides continents, can be removed.

Therefore, Paul desires to boast 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. That is exactly what the Judaizers were arguing—that we are not justified through faith in Jesus Christ alone, but 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 had commissioned him to preach, and this is why the Judaizers have placed themselves under God's curse, been severed from Christ and have 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. For those who live in light of Christ's crucifixion are free to serve one another in love, since the cross is a graphic picture to us that no one's righteousness is great than another's—as the Judaizers were teaching—and so sowing the seeds of dissension and division that were tearing the church apart. Thus Paul speaks of one cross, but two crucifixions. Thus not only has Christ been crucified to remove the curse, but through the cross, says Paul, "*the world has been crucified to me.*" Now united to Christ in the likeness of his death through faith, Paul realizes that 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 and to seek to boast in it is simply foolish. For 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. Thus, 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 that instrument of scandal.

But Paul also states that not only has the world been crucified to him, but 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 have done. But the apostle does renounce the standards of the world, the values of the world and his intellectual identification with the way that the world thinks about matters of sin and grace—in other words, he is renouncing the “basic principles of the world” championed by the Judaizers in which it is understood that people reach heaven by “being good,” and avoid hell by not doing anything terrible.

Thus, when all is said and done, Paul can say “*neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is 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—that is, as the sign of God’s favor under the covenant of grace. But here, 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,” that is, 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. For we participate in the new creation when we are united to Jesus Christ by faith, and we not only die with him in his sacrificial death, but we also rise with him in newness of life to walk in the Spirit. For Paul 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 concludes this letter and sends his greetings, “*Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule,*” in other words, to those who do not trust in circumcision to justify, but who trust in the cross of Jesus Christ as their only hope of heaven. And in doing so, Paul speaks of the church—those who follow this rule—as the “*Israel of God.*” Since, in verse 15, Paul has made it absolutely clear that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, and that 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. For Paul, the true “Israel of God,” refers to those very people who participate in the new creation, namely those who walk in the Spirit, and for whom Christ has died to remove the curse. Thus, it is clear from a statement such as this, that all those who trust in Jesus Christ—whether they be Jew or Gentile—are indeed part of the new creation, which is the true “Israel of God.” This, of course, is a final shot at the Judaizers, who are now regarded as apostates who have fallen from grace, for the true Israel of God is comprised of those who have been crucified with Christ and indwelt by the Spirit of God. And while he is at it, Paul puts them on notice in verse 17— “*let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.*” For the man who is scarred from being nearly stoned to death for preaching the gospel, has seen the strong hand of God deliver him many times before. Paul is afraid of no man, because he fears God! “*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 that the cross must be central in the teaching and preaching of Christ’s church is very, very, simple. The cross of our Lord is our only hope of heaven—and 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. And 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. We too, as members of the New Israel, and participate in all the blessings of the new creation—because we our standing before God does not depend upon a surgical procedure, nor upon what we eat or drink, nor upon the calendar we use, or upon our

obedience to the Law of Moses—despite what modern Judaizers will tell us. Rather, says Paul we are justified by the merits of Jesus Christ, received through faith alone, apart from works! For in the new creation there is a full and perfect forgiveness of sin, and 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. For in the new creation, we are clothed with Christ through baptism, and we feed upon our savior's blessed body—the heavenly manna—through faith. And 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. For in Jesus Christ, we are free from the guilt of our sins, free from the yoke of the Law and free from those who seek to enslave our consciences from 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 tree, and shed his precious blood for us. How can we boast in anything else?

Beloved, all of these unspeakable privileges and promises are for us this very morning. For 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 in his Word and he bids to us this morning to come and join him at his table. Here is freedom from the yoke 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. Therefore, what foolishness it is to boast in our own righteousness, or seek favor with God through any other means. For all that we need is here. Therefore, let it be our prayer this morning, “may I never boast, except in the cross of Jesus Christ!” For what counts is a new creation, and all of its blessings—the very blessings of heaven itself—are ours this morning.

Amen!