

“THE CROSS MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE”

Tonight we come to the concluding section of this great letter. One of the things that stands out about the epistle to the Galatians is how Paul always has his overall objective in view. No matter what he is talking about in a particular section, everything that he says in this letter contributes to his main argument, an argument that is summed up well by Paul’s statement in chapter 3 that “the law is not of faith.” Paul wrote this letter to make it clear that there is a distinction between the law and the gospel. And he did so because the false teachers who were troubling the Galatian churches were making a muddle of this distinction by saying that Gentile believers need to be circumcised. These false teachers were telling the Galatian Christians that they had to come under the law of Moses if they wanted to be accepted by God. But Paul confronts this teaching by telling the Galatians that if they accept circumcision they will be placing themselves back under the curse that the law pronounces upon all who fail to keep its requirements perfectly. The law of Moses was given to prepare the way for Christ by exposing our sin. Now that Christ has come, those who try to find acceptance with God on the basis of the law make themselves subject to the law as a covenant of works. If they fail to keep it in every part, they will fall under its curse. Paul wants the Galatians to understand that justification is by faith alone and not in any sense by the works of the law. This is the point that he drives home again and again in this letter.

At the same time, Paul is careful to emphasize that the freedom that the gospel brings to us is not to be viewed as a license to sin. The Christian is not to say, as Westminster

Seminary president Robert Godfrey humorously puts it, “God likes to forgive; I like to sin – what a great relationship!” While it is true that our obedience is not the basis of our justification, the reason why we have been set free from being under the law is so that the law might now serve as our guide for life. We are to walk by the Spirit, not to gratify the desires of the flesh. We are to sow to the Spirit, not to the flesh. As one theologian puts it, “The law no longer stands over us as tablets of stone demanding our condemnation, but it is written on our hearts.” [Michael Horton, in *The Law is Not of Faith*, 330] This has been Paul’s focus in chapters 5 and 6.

In this concluding portion of the letter, Paul summarizes these themes with one last warning against the teachings of the Judaizers. Once again, he sets the law and the gospel in contrast to each other. And in these verses he does so by setting circumcision and the cross in contrast to each other. The Judaizers wanted the Galatians to be circumcised so that they could boast about their circumcision, but Paul tells the Galatians that the Christian’s only ground of boasting is the cross of Christ.

While the chapter and section divisions in our English translations have been added by translators, Paul’s words in verse 11 make it very clear that this is the concluding section of this letter. They indicate that up to this point in the letter Paul has been dictating his words to a scribe, a practice that is well-attested in the closing greetings of many of his other letters. But now, as Paul brings the letter to a close, he takes the pen in his own hand and writes these final words to the Galatians.

As for the reason for the “large letters” with which Paul says he writes, we can only guess. Perhaps he intentionally wrote with large letters to get his readers’ attention, as we might use boldface or write in all capital letters to get our reader’s attention. Or perhaps his writing was large because of poor eyesight or because of an injury or disability. Perhaps it had something to do with Paul’s mysterious “thorn in the flesh.” Whatever the reason, Paul’s purpose in calling attention to his large handwriting is clear: he wants to assure the Galatians that he is the author of this letter and that it bears his apostolic authority. They need to listen to what he says.

In verses 12-13, Paul talks about the Judaizers’ motives for trying to convince the Galatians to be circumcised. He says that they wanted “to make a good showing in the flesh,” a statement that carries two levels of meaning. On the one hand, the Judaizers wanted to boast in the physical flesh of the Galatians’ circumcised foreskins. They wanted to be able to take credit for the number of men they were able to persuade to be circumcised. This may sound a bit strange to us, but it is really not all that different from the boasting that takes place in those Christian circles where so much emphasis is placed upon statistics or the number of people who have “made decisions for Christ.”

The other sense of the phrase “make a good showing in the flesh” has to do with the fact that the Judaizers were seeking to obtain a righteous standing before God on the basis of works done in the power of the flesh. They were operating under a works-principle. They thought that their works of the law had something to do with their justification. They took pride in their attempts to convince others to get circumcised.

But Paul exposes the great irony to this by noting that the Judaizers did not themselves keep the law. This illustrates the problem with legalistic approaches to salvation, approaches that say that we can earn God's favor through our works. The legalist makes too little of God's law. He thinks that he can boil the law down to a set of manageable rules. And he thinks that if he lives by these rules, he will be accepted by God on the basis of his performance. The only reason why people think that they can be justified on the basis of how they conduct their lives is because they measure themselves by their own standard instead of by the standard of God's holy law. They say, 'Well, I don't think I am all that bad, especially when you think about how some other people live. I think I am a basically good person. Surely God will accept me.' But when we understand that the only performance that God accepts is the perfect performance of every single aspect of his law, both in terms of its positive requirements and its negative prohibitions, we realize that there is no way we will ever be accepted by God on the basis of our performance. This is why we need to gospel. It is the reason why the cross of Christ is essential.

If we try to find acceptance with God on the basis of our performance, we will inevitably downplay the cross. And this is exactly what the Judaizers were doing. Paul tells us that they wanted to avoid being persecuted for preaching the cross. They were ashamed of the cross. So they downplayed the cross by preaching the cross plus circumcision. Remember, the earliest persecution of Christians did not come from the Romans, but from the Jews. The cross of Christ was scandalous to the Jews. To be

crucified was to be under God's curse. The Judaizers tried to appease the Jews by teaching that justification came through the works of the law.

This sort of thing is perennial error. We see it time and time again in church history whenever the church succumbs to the temptation of changing the gospel message in order to appease the world. It is not hard to understand the logic that lies behind this error. It goes like this: 'The world does not like the message of the cross. If we keep on preaching the cross of Christ, the world will not listen to us. It will not respect us. It may even persecute us. Therefore, for the sake of the church's continued existence, we need to adapt our message to make it more acceptable in the eyes of the world.' In the Judaizers' case, this meant adding something to the gospel. In our day, in which liberal theology is the main threat to the gospel, it often means taking something away from the gospel. As the 20th century Reformed minister and scholar R.B. Kuiper astutely said, "a preacher's liberalism often comes to clearer light in what he does not say than in what he says." [*To Be or Not to Be Reformed*, 34] This is so true. If you were to visit the liberal churches in our area you would probably find that a considerable amount of what is said from the pulpit is not all that objectionable. After all, who is going to argue with a message that says that we ought to be nice to others? But many of the Bible's teachings, especially the things that form the very heart of the Bible's message of salvation, will never be heard from those pulpits. Like the Judaizers, such churches are ashamed of the message of the cross.

In verse 14, Paul tells us that we must not boast in our own performance, but that we should boast in the cross. It is the cross, not our works, that brings about the decisive change in our relationship to this fallen world. Through the cross, the world is crucified to us and we are crucified to the world. The world and its values are no longer important to us. We sow to the Spirit, not to the flesh. We are dead to the enticements of the world, because we have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. We no longer live by the “elementary principles of the world,” the legalistic principle that says that we have to attain righteousness through our performance of the law. Instead, we belong to the new creation, the new world that God is bringing into existence through Christ and his cross.

This is Paul’s point in verse 15, where he says that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but what counts is a new creation. As Christians, we are no longer a part of the old world, even though we still live in it. Through the cross we are transferred from the old world into the new creation. And through the cross we are freed from the principle of works that we might live by the Spirit. In the words of commentator Ronald Fung, “the cross, which marks the line of demarcation between the old world and the new creation, also marks the line of demarcation between circumcision and the law on the one hand and justification by faith on the other.” [309]

In verse 16, Paul pronounces a blessing upon those “who walk by this rule,” that is, upon those who live in this world as members of God’s new creation community in Christ. And at the end of this verse Paul says something that is of great significance for our understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. He writes,

“peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” Who is Paul referring to when he speaks of “the Israel of God”? Given the overriding emphasis of Galatians it is utterly unthinkable that Paul would be making a separate reference to Jewish Christians here. That would undermine everything he has said in this letter, including his statement in the preceding verse, where he said that “neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision.” By referring to “the Israel of God” here Paul is saying that believers in Christ, who comprise the new creation, are the true Israel of God. Contrary to the teaching of dispensational theology, there is no distinction between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. Both belong to the same people of God. The church is the fulfillment and continuation of what Israel was before the coming of Christ. This is why Paul described Christians as those who have “the Jerusalem above” as their mother back in chapter 4. We find the same sort of thing all throughout Paul’s letters, as he frequently refers to the church with the Old Testament names for Israel, such as “God’s chosen ones” [Colossians 3:12], “the saints,” and even “the real circumcision.” [Philippians 3:3] The church is the true Israel.

In verse 17, Paul warns the Galatians to stop making matters so difficult for him by listening to the teachings of the Judaizers. And as he makes this appeal, he calls their attention to the fact that he bears on his body the marks of Jesus. Unlike the false teachers who were ashamed of the cross, Paul had endured serious persecution for Christ’s sake. He knew the fellowship of sharing in Christ’s sufferings, and this was his badge as a true minister of the gospel.

The final verse of the letter contains a benediction, a blessing that Paul pronounces upon his readers. And this benediction sums up the message of this book. This is what the gospel is all about: the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is with us. Because of Christ and his cross, we do not live under the law, but under grace. And this is why we sing:

Forbid it Lord, that I should boast,

Save in the death of Christ my God