

Galatians

The Marks of Freedom

Galatians 6:11-18

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Scripture

It was Paul's custom, after dictating a letter to an amanuensis, which is a secretary, to take a pen and write his own farewell. His standard signature was, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:28; 2 Thessalonians 3:17-18).

But Paul is so concerned that the Galatians get the message of this letter that he takes the pen and writes an entire concluding paragraph with his own hand. "See what large letters I use," says Paul in verse 1, "as I write to you with my own hand!"

Why did Paul write this paragraph? And why did he use such large letters?

The Holy Spirit inspired him to add these closing words to give one more contrast between legalists and Christians, to show that Christians live for the glory of God, not for the praise of men.

And he wrote in large letters, perhaps because of an eye defect, but more likely, for emphasis. In other words, he is saying: "DON'T MISS THIS!"¹ Let us read 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.

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Free* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1975), 151.

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. (Galatians 6:11-18)

Introduction

Today, we come to our concluding study in Paul's letter to the Galatians. He wrote this letter because the Galatians were drifting away from a proper understanding of the gospel. After the apostle Paul had planted a number of churches in the region of Galatia, some false teachers—known as Judaizers, or legalists—came after him and began teaching another gospel (Galatians 1:6-9).

Lesson

The legalists wanted to subject the Galatian Christians to circumcision (as a means of earning favor with God), so Paul addresses this issue one last time by relating it to the work of Christ on the cross and his own ministry.

In this section, Paul presents three “marked men”—the legalist (6:12-13), the Lord Jesus Christ (6:14-16), and the apostle Paul himself (6:17-18).

I. The Legalist (6:12-13)

First, notice the legalist.

Paul does not have anything good to say about the legalist. He describes him and his kind in four ways.

A. They Are Braggarts (6:12a, 13b)

First, legalists are braggarts.

Their main purpose was not to win people to Christ, or even to help believers grow in grace. Their main purpose was to win

more converts so that they could brag about them. Paul says in verse 12a, “**Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised.**” And he continues in verse 13b, “**Yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh.**” Their work was not done for the glory of God or for the good of the church; it was done for their own glory.

While it is not wrong to want to win people to Christ, or to see the work of the Lord increase, it is definitely wrong to want these blessings for our own glory. As Warren Wiersbe says, “We want to see more people sharing in our ministries, not so that we can count people, but because people count.”²

B. *They Are Compromisers (6:12b)*

Second, legalists are compromisers.

Why did legalists preach and practice circumcision and all that went with it? Paul says in verse 12b, “**The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.**” In other words, they compromised the message of the gospel.

Paul preached the grace of God and salvation apart from works. And for that he was persecuted (cf. Galatians 5:11). When Paul trusted in Christ as Lord and Savior, he identified himself with the cross and took the consequences.

Today we look at the cross in a sentimental way. We wear crosses as lapel pins and on chains around our necks. But to the people in Paul’s day, the cross was not a beautiful piece of jewelry. It was the lowest form of death and humiliation. The cross stood for shame and rejection.

The equivalent of the cross today might be the electric chair for death row criminals. Imagine if I wore a little gold electric chair as a lapel pin or on a chain around my neck. “How insensitive and thoughtless,” you would say, and you would be right.

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Free* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1975), 153.

To the Jews the cross was a stumbling block, and to the Gentiles it was foolishness (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18-31). The legalists, however, did not stress the cross of Christ. They preached a religion that was popular because they avoided the shame of the cross.

C. They Are Persuaders (6:12a)

Third, legalists are persuaders.

Paul says in verse 12a, “**Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised.**” The Greek word for “compel” is a strong one and carries with it the idea of strong persuasion and even force, although it does not mean force against one’s will. It indicates that the legalists were great persuaders. They had a “sales talk” that convinced the Galatian Christians that legalism was the way for them. Their approach was so different than Paul’s. Whenever Paul presented the Word, it was in truth and sincerity, and he used no oratorical tricks (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, 2 Corinthians 4:1-5).

D. They Are Hypocrites (6:13)

And finally, legalists are hypocrites.

Paul said in verse 13, “**Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh.**” Paul condemns the legalists for their dishonesty. They had no intention of keeping the law themselves, yet they wanted the Galatians to obey the law. Their outward reverence for the law was only a mask to cover their real goal: winning more converts for their cause. They wanted to report more statistics and get more glory.

Dr. J. Vernon McGee notes that those who claim to live under the law are not actually living under the law. He gives an example of the time he went as a young pastor to speak to the Chamber of Commerce in Nashville, Tennessee. He arrived early and one of the officials was already at the speaker’s table. He began

talking with Dr. McGee with a mouth more foul than a sailor's. Dr. McGee didn't say anything. He just let the man talk. Finally, the man said to Dr. McGee, "By the way, what's your racket?"

Dr. McGee told him he was a preacher.

The man looked at Dr. McGee in astonishment and surprise and said, "Are you the speaker today?"

"Yes," said Dr. McGee.

The man immediately began treading water! "Well," he said, "we're glad to have you. I want you to know that I am a Christian."

That was news to Dr. McGee because his profanity moments earlier belied his profession. The man enlarged upon his profession by saying that he was an elder in a large fashionable church in Nashville. He told Dr. McGee all the wonderful things he did and then said, "The Sermon on the Mount is my religion."

Dr. McGee said, "That's great! How are you doing with it?"

"What do you mean, 'How am I doing with it?'" the man said.

"Well," said Dr. McGee, "you say that the Sermon on the Mount is your religion, and I would just like to know if you're living by it."

The man said he tried to.

"But that is not what the Sermon on the Mount is all about," said Dr. McGee. "It sets a perfect standard and it hasn't anything there about trying. You either live by it or you don't. Now you say it's your religion and I assume therefore that you live by it."

The man said that he certainly tried.

So Dr. McGee pushed him a little further. "Do you obey the Sermon on the Mount?" asked Dr. McGee.

The man said, "I guess I do."

"Well, let's see if you do. The Lord Jesus said that if you are angry with your brother, you are guilty of murder. How do you make out on that one?"

The man hesitated, "Well, I might have a little trouble there, but I think I get by."

"All right," said Dr. McGee, "let's try another commandment that Jesus lifted to the nth degree. He said that if you as much as

look upon a woman to lust after her, you're guilty of adultery. How about that one?"

"Oh," the man said, "that one would get me."

And so Dr. McGee said, "Look, you're not keeping the Sermon on the Mount. If I were you I'd change my religion and get one I could keep."³

Do you see what the man was? He was a hypocrite. He was telling others that he was living by the Sermon on the Mount and then breaking it at every turn. He needed the grace of God.

II. Jesus Christ (6:14-16)

Second, let's look at Jesus Christ.

Paul keeps coming back to the cross of Christ. Christ was certainly a "marked man," for the wounds at Calvary marked him. But those wounds also mean freedom to anyone who trusts in Christ. The legalists boasted about their circumcision; but Paul boasted in a crucified and risen Savior. Why would Paul boast in the cross of Christ?

A. *He Knew the Person of the Cross*

First, he knew the person of the cross.

Jesus Christ is mentioned some 45 times in this Galatian letter. The person of Jesus captivated Paul, and it was Christ who made the cross glorious to him.

The legalists did not boast in the cross because they were not captivated by the person of Christ. It was Moses—and themselves—who got the glory. They did not really know the person of the cross.

Neither circumcision, water baptism, church membership, obedience to the law, nor adhering to a new list of dos and don'ts makes any difference as far as our relationship to God is con-

³ J. Vernon McGee, *Galatians*, Thru the Bible Commentary Series (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), 126-127.

cerned. The only thing that matters is whether or not we have become new creations through Christ's death. We have to encounter the person of Christ if we want to be transformed.

B. He Knew the Power of the Cross

Second, he knew the power of the cross.

In Paul's day we said that the cross was a symbol of shame and disgrace. The Jews believed—correctly—that anyone who died on a cross was cursed by God. Deuteronomy 21:23 says, “Cursed is anyone who is hung on a tree” (cf. Galatians 3:13). And so before Paul was converted he could not conceive that the Messiah would die on a cross. Why the very idea was preposterous!

Yet he came to experience the power of the cross and realized that Christ was indeed cursed, but not for his own sins! He was cursed for the sins of the world (cf. 1 John 2:1-2). And so the cross ceased to be a stumbling block to him. In fact, it became the very foundation of his message: “Christ died for *our* sins.”

I am reminded of Martin Luther who said that Christianity is a religion of personal pronouns. By that he meant we should not say, “Christ died for sins” but rather we should say, “Christ died for *my* sins.” Can you say that?

C. He Knew the Purpose of the Cross

And third, he knew the purpose of the cross.

The purpose of the cross is to reconcile unrighteous sinners with a holy God. The cross is God's method of reconciliation. Sinners can receive forgiveness and a new life when they come to God via the cross of Christ. And so Paul says, “**Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation**” (6:15).

Paul would never have had any difficulty with the legalism of his day if he had presented the gospel as only a competitor in the field of religions.

Let me illustrate. Suppose we developed a new brand of soap. We advertised our soap and said that it is better than any other soap on the market. We would be competing with all of the other brands on the market for people to buy. However, if we said that our soap is the only soap on the market that will get anyone clean and that none of the other soaps work, we could find ourselves in a lot of trouble.

That is what Paul was claiming for the gospel. If he had said, “Judaism is good but Christianity is better,” he would not have had much trouble at all, because that’s what advertisers say today—our product is better than others soaps on the market. That’s competition.

But Paul is saying that Judaism is nothing. Circumcision is nothing. The only thing that counts is a new creation. Paul is saying that all other religions are false. The only true religion is Christianity. That’s exclusivity.

How do I know that Christianity is true? Because three days after Jesus was buried he rose again from the dead. Christianity is a religion of the cross with an empty tomb!

III. The Apostle Paul (6:17-18)

Finally, let’s look at the apostle Paul.

There was a time when Paul was proud of his circumcision (cf. Philippians 3:4-6). But after he became a Christian, he became a “marked man” in a different way. He now gloried in the scars he had received and in the suffering he had endured in the service of Jesus Christ.

The contrast with the legalists was plain to see: “The legalists want you to mark your flesh and brag about you, but I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.”

Paul is claiming that he had suffered for Christ’s sake. He had suffered for preaching the gospel of grace and the cross of Christ. Listen to what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11:23b-28:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

In Paul's day it was the practice to brand slaves, so that everyone would know who the owner was. Paul was the slave of Jesus Christ, and he wore the brands to show that Christ was his owner.

The legalists in Paul's day knew nothing of suffering for Christ. They may have been persecuted in some small way for belonging to a religious group, but that is far different than suffering for Christ.

Beware of religious leaders who live in ivory towers and know nothing of suffering for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul was no armchair general; he was out in the front lines, waging war against sin, and taking his share of suffering.

Conclusion

So, Paul comes to the end of his letter, and he closes the way he began: Grace! Not the Law of Moses, but grace. And so Paul closes with, **“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen”** (6:18). Nothing more needs to be said because that doxology says it all.

I read about an instant cake mix that was a big flop. The instructions said that all you had to do was “add water and bake.” The company couldn’t understand why it didn’t sell—until their

research discovered that the buying public felt uneasy about a mix that required *only* water. Apparently people thought it was too easy.

So the company altered the formula and changed the directions to call for adding an egg to the mix in addition to the water. The idea worked and sales jumped dramatically.

That story reminds me of how some people react to the gospel. To them it sounds too easy and simple to be true, even though the Bible says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

They feel that there is something more that they must do, something they must add to faith. They think they must perform good works to gain God’s favor and earn eternal life. But the Bible is clear: we are saved “not because of righteous things we [have] done, but because of his mercy” (Titus 3:5).

Unlike the cake-mix manufacturer, God has not changed his “formula” to make salvation more marketable. The gospel we proclaim and believe must be free of works, even though it may sound too easy.

In order to come into a right relationship with God, you do not need to add works to faith. You simply need faith. This is what Paul’s letter to the Galatians is all about.

Believe in Christ alone, and you will be saved. Amen.

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equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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