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Galatians 6:11-18

The Centrality of the Cross of Christ

If you had one last chance to communicate the most important thing in the world to your loved ones, what would it be? Ray Ortlund, Jr., a retired pastor, tells the story of receiving his father's last message for him before he died. His father was also a pastor, Ray Ortlund, Sr. During his last day on earth, he knew he was dying, and he intentionally said his final words to his family members. And this is the final message he gave to his son: "Ministry isn't everything. Jesus is." Ortlund, Sr. had a long, very prosperous, and famous ministry. Some of you have even told me how you had the privilege to hear him speak in person. His son has likewise had a long, faithful ministry. And yet in his final moments, this father wanted to remind his son that the most important thing in all of life is not ministry - no matter how good and profitable it may be - or any other thing in this life, but one: Jesus Christ. Given one more opportunity to give a final message of central importance, the message was the utmost importance of Jesus above all else.¹

As the Apostle Paul drew his letter to the Galatians to a close, he did something very similar in Gal. 6:11-18. This final passage opens in verse 11: "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand." As was his custom, and common in the Greco-Roman world, Paul usually wrote his letters by dictating them out loud as a scribe wrote down the words for him. But now, as the letter draws to a close, Paul stops his dictation, walks over, and picks up the pen himself. He writes these words - not just verse 11, but this entire final section - in his own hand. And he let's them know it, even writing the letters far larger than all the words that came before. And this served a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, it worked like a signature would today, authenticating this letter as genuinely coming from Paul, the Apostle, so that these Christians could trust it. But the second purpose of writing these final section in his own hand, with much larger letters, is to *emphasize* the significance of these final words he gives here to the Galatians. If you're reading a book and all the font is times 12, and then you flip to the last page and it's all in font 20, it's going to stand out and catch your attention; it clearly draws emphasis to this section. Therefore, it was a cue to his original readers, and a cue to us: *listen up*; hear this last, final word. But he's not introducing a new idea or subject matter - he's simply wrapping up and summarizing the entire argument and message of the letter. His argument finished, his

¹ See <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/10-unforgettable-lessons-on-fatherhood>.

warning given, his appeals and exhortations made, he now gives one last final word here at the end, summarizing the main themes and purpose of this letter. He closes it in such a way as to make crystal clear what the most important message of Galatians is all about: all along, the book of Galatians has been about defending and defining the message of the only true gospel - that we are justified - that we are declared righteous, part of God's people, and receive the blessing of eternal life - not by the Law, not by our own good works and efforts, not by our identity and standing in this world, but *only* by grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ! And this is exactly the message Paul ends with: *the centrality of the cross of Jesus Christ*.

First, we see Paul's final warning:

I. We Must Keep the Cross Central, No Matter What it Costs Us in this World (6:12-14, 17)

Paul begins his final warning to the Galatians against the false teachers in v.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." Paul has spoken at length about this group of Judaizers throughout the book of the Galatians, making it clear that they are false teachers preaching a false gospel, and is now making one last , urgent warning to the Galatians so that they will not give in or be led astray by them. This is the very reason Paul wrote this entire letter to the Galatians in the first place. So let's refresh our memories real quick on who these people are and what's going on here. You see, Galatia was a region outside of Israel; the majority of the people there were not Jews, but were Gentile pagans. On his missionary journey, which we see in the book of Acts, Paul had come to Galatia and preached the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ: that Jesus God's promised King and savior, not just for the Jews, but for all people everywhere; that He lived a perfect life, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again on the third day so that *anyone* who repents and believes - turns from sin and idolatry and turns to faith in Christ alone - will be saved, purely by grace through faith! Many gentile pagans repented and believed in Galatia. Paul baptized them and planted churches throughout the region.

But then, after Paul left, a group of Jews who claimed to be Christians and believe in Jesus as the Messiah had come from Jerusalem to the Christians in Galatia, trying to "force" them to be "circumcised." They told these brand new Gentile Christians that it was good that they believed in Christ, but that in order to truly be Christians, in order to truly be part of God's

people and receive the blessings of righteousness and salvation, they needed to become Jews and come under the Law; so while they claimed to preach Christ, they preached *circumcision*; they tried to “force” these new Christians to be circumcised, adding works of the law to the gospel. And so, Paul wrote this letter, making it very clear that when we add to the gospel or change it at all, then *it's no longer the gospel - it's a false gospel*. These false teachers were false Christians, preaching a false gospel, trying to lead the Galatians astray - and the Galatians were falling into their trap! Paul made this clear from the beginning of the letter, in chapter 1, verses 6-7: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - not that there is another one, but there are some who distort the gospel of Christ.” Here in this final warning, Paul makes clear that these false teachers don't have good intentions, but are insincere and sinful in their motivations: they are trying to “force” them to get circumcised and be enslaved to the law in order to “make a good showing in the flesh.” They claim to be Christians, but they are liars and have false, wicked motives. As Paul warned them in chapter 4:17, “They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.”

The second half of v.12 makes clear that their motives don't come from the Spirit, but from fear, being ashamed of the cross of Christ: they force circumcision “in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.” As Christianity began to spread throughout the ancient Greco-Roman world, the early Christians faced more and more persecution on every side. Often times, that persecution came from the Jewish people. Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah were persecuted by the unbelieving Jews, as we see clearly throughout the book of Acts. So these Judaizers, the false teachers from Jeruslaem, were trying to change the gospel in order to try and escape persecution from the unbelieving Jews. By forcing Gentile believers to become circumcised, only eat Jewish foods, keep the Sabbaths and the Jewish calender, and keep the law as good Jews, they could prove that they were still keeping the Law, still part of the Jewish people just as much as the non-believing Jews. But Paul has made it very clear: this is anti-gospel! In doing so, they were abandoning the cross of Christ, ashamed of the persecution it brought. They preached the Law, not the gospel. They caved in the face of persecution, giving into the unbelieving world and abandoning the message of the cross.

But Paul would do no such thing. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel. Paul does not give in to the sinful influence of the world, nor seek it's approval. These false teachers sought to “make

a good showing in the flesh” and even “boast” in the flesh. They sought the world’s approval, fearing the persecution that comes from the unbelieving world, and so they gave into it. But Paul doesn’t seek the approval of the world. On the contrary, he says, “the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (v.14). As he said in chapter 1:10, “Am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.” No, he sees himself as dead to the world and the world dead to him! As he said in chapter 2, verse 20: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” And this is not just true of Paul, but of all who are in Christ through faith in His gospel! Or again, in 5:24, “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” We are united to Christ by grace through faith! When Christ died on the cross for our sins, we died with Him! Sin, Satan, and even Death itself are dead to us and have no power over us! We are crucified to the world! In His death on the cross, Christ “gave himself to deliver us from this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4). Unlike these false teachers who gave into persecution by changing the gospel, Paul kept the message of the cross central even in the face of great suffering and persecution. Verse 17 reminds us of this: “From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.” In that day and age, slaves and soldiers would bear “marks” on their bodies, such as brands and tattoos, identifying them with their masters. Paul claims that his also bears marks identifying him with his crucified savior, Jesus Christ. But what are these identifying marks of Christ? I think it’s best to understand them as the physical marks of suffering and persecution that Paul endured for the sake of the cross, just as Christ endured for our sake *on the cross*. I think it’s parallel to what Paul says in Col. 1:24: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.” Paul is bearing the marks of Jesus in his own body, his flesh, by suffering and enduring persecution for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of Christ’s people, the Church. AND it’s not like Paul is doing this to contribute to his salvation or to make atonement for anyone else - no, by no means! Christ’s sacrificial death was completely sufficient! But Paul is participating in the afflictions of Christ Jesus by suffering for the sake of the gospel, showing that he is not ashamed of the cross, but boasts in it, putting all of his confidence and hope in it! And so Paul endured all sufferings and persecutions for the sake of the cross, no matter the cost!

And so we are called to do as well. We must cling to the gospel message of the cross of Christ no matter what the cost in our lives. And make no mistake: it can be very costly. The unbelieving world hates the message of the cross, and it will hate us as well, just as Jesus promised it would. As we follow Christ and cling to the cross, we will face persecution. And this month, of all months, reminds us of that, doesn't it? It's June, and as I'm sure we all know by now, that means it's "Pride Month." Just about every store, retailer, and business you can think of is virtue signaling all throughout this month that they are part of the moral revolution. You can't buy a coffee or go to the gym these days without being told that in order to be loving and inclusive to all people, we have to affirm and accept LGBTQ+ values and lifestyles as morally good. But that is absolutely contrary to the truth of God's Word, the Bible. Therefore, it's against Christianity, and ultimately, the gospel of the cross. The same Christ who died for our sins is the same Christ who calls us to walk by the Spirit, and not give into or live by the works of the flesh. And as Paul just told us in Gal. 5:19, "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality," and so on. To be a Christian is to repent and turn away from the works of the flesh and the sinful ways and values of the unbelieving world around us. And the world knows this. Our culture is becoming increasingly and explicitly anti-Christian. More and more Christians and churches are being persecuted for clinging steadfastly to the worldview of the Bible. Sadly, some people who claim to be Christians are giving into this persecution, changing their beliefs in order to please the world and avoid persecution. There are many false teachers in our day who will try to get us to change our message in order to be more acceptable to the world, make a good showing in the flesh, and become slaves to sin and the world once more. But that's not an option for us. We're called to cling to the cross and follow Christ no matter what the cost! Following Christ may bring persecution. It will bring difficulty. It will change our lives. It may cost us relationships with friends and family. It may even cost us our jobs and livelihood, as we suffer for the cross of Christ and don't give into the world around us. But we must endure by truly believing that the cross really is more important than anything this world has to offer! We must keep the cross central no matter the cost! AND we can do this because *the cross is well worth whatever that cost may be!*

And this is because the cross alone brings us salvation. Which leads us to our second and final point:

II. The Cross is Central to Our Identity: We are Saved and Part of God's People by Grace through Faith, Not Works (6:13-16, 18)

The reason the cross is so important, and why we must cling to the gospel of the cross no matter what it costs us, is because this gospel alone is our hope of salvation; the cross of Christ is central to our identity, to who we are. We see this clearly in vv.13-15: "For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in you flesh. 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. For neither circumcision counts for anything, but a new creation."

The false teachers were trying to "force" the Galatian Christians to be circumcised and come under the Law in order to truly be saved and be part of God's people. And yet, ironically, "even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law" (v.13)! The Law cannot save us because we cannot keep the Law. We cannot obey God, because all of us are sinners; none of us can earn righteousness, blessing, and life, but all of us deserve the curse of God's wrath against our sin. This was the whole point of the law all along - to show us our sinfulness, the wrath we deserve, and our need for Jesus Christ to save us through his cross and resurrection. Paul made this clear in chapter 3: "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse," (3:10); "Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith'" (3:11); and in 3:21-22, "For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe." This is why the law can't save us; we are not saved by our good works in any way whatsoever! The message of Jesus plus circumcision, or Jesus plus works = salvation is a *false gospel!* We're saved by grace through faith in Christ alone! For, "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" (Gal. 2:16). This is the gospel message that Paul has fought so hard to clarify and define in Galatians: that we are all sinners who deserve the curse of God's wrath for our sins, and we could never do enough good works to be righteous before God! We can't even keep the Law of Moses perfectly enough to earn life! The Law just shows us how sinful we are and our need for grace! Our need for a savior! And the gospel tells us that such a gracious savior has come: Jesus Christ, who lived

a perfectly righteous life in our place, died on the cross for our sins, and rising again! “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). THIS is the glorious gospel hope: we are saved not by works, but by grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ alone!

Therefore, it’s not about keeping the Mosaic Law, it’s not about circumcision or uncircumcision; all that “counts for anything,” Paul says in v.15, is “a new creation.” On the one hand, this points forward to the New Heavens and New Earth that Christ will usher in in His Second Coming; it points ahead to our final salvation and the blessing of eternal life that is ours through faith in Christ! We who are sinners will be declared righteous and will enter into a New Creation, receive the blessings of eternal life that Christ has earned on our behalf! But on the other hand, Paul isn’t just pointing ahead: this is also a present reality. Even now, we are a new creation in Christ; even now we are born again of the Spirit and walk by the Spirit. In other words, Paul is saying: because of the cross, *you’re completely different, even now!* The cross is all that matters because the Cross is now what defines who we are! The cross is central to our identity, because faith in the message of the cross is what makes us Christians and shows we’re part of God’s people! This is Paul’s point in v.16: And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” He’s saying that those who walk by the rule of the New Creation - those who walk by the Spirit through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ - are those who experience the peace and mercy of God’s salvation; we are those who are “the Israel of God.” What Paul is saying here is remarkable: true Israel, the Israel of God, is not ethnic Israel - not those who are born Jewish - but is comprised of those who believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ! That is, all Christians, regardless of our ethnic background, are the true “Israel of God.” Christ’s Church is true Israel. And this isn’t a new idea Paul is putting forth; he’s already argued this in Galatians, in chapter 3:7-9: “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” Being born a Jew, a physical descendant of Abraham, doesn’t make you apart of God’s people or bring the blessings of eternal life and righteousness - only faith in Jesus Christ does! And this means *all of us who trust in Christ alone are part of true israel, the true, redeemed blessed people of God!*

In other words, Paul is ending Galatians this way by reminding us one more time *who we are according to the gospel!* He's telling us that what defines our identity is nothing else then the cross of Christ - that we're no longer defined by the things of the flesh or of this world, but only defined by what Jesus Christ has done for us and who we are in Him! We're crucified to the world; it no longer defines us! "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:28-29). We're no longer defined by our ethnic and cultural backgrounds, or the family we were born into; in Christ, we're part of the family of God! We're sons of Abraham, children of promise! Not just children, but we're all counted as *firstborn sons* - we're all heirs of the promise, heirs of the inheritance of God! We're no longer defined by our slavery to sin, by our failure under the law, by our slavery to the world - no, we're no longer slaves, but we're free in Christ! Free from slavery to the law, for Christ has borne the curse we deserve and fulfilled the law for us in his life, death, and resurrection! We're no longer slaves to the "elementary principles of the world," but are set free to live as sons and heirs of God (Gal. 4:1-11)! We're no longer slaves to the law, no longer slaves to our guilt, shame, and condemnation, no longer defined by our sins and failures - we are forgiven and redeemed, declared righteous in Christ! We're no longer slaves to sin and the flesh, but are filled with the Spirit as a New Creation, free to "walk by the Spirit" and "no longer gratify the desires of the flesh" (Gal. 5:13-25)! If you're in Christ this morning, you're not defined by the values of the world; you're not defined by what the world thinks about you; you're not defined by what your friends, family members, coworkers, or those who persecute you say about you; you're not defined by your background; you're not defined by your failures; you're not even defined by the ways you've fallen short and sinned this week! What defines you is the cross of Christ! What defines you is who you are in Christ by grace through faith! Not because of what you and I have done or haven't done - it's all about what Christ has done! The cross is central because it's all about Jesus, not us!

That's the final message Paul wants us to come away with as he concludes this letter: he wants us to firmly remember who we are in Christ because of the gospel. He wants us to firmly believe the gospel so that the centrality of the cross of Christ defines our identity, and nothing else. That's the message of this passage, of this letter to the Galatians, the very message of the gospel: that because Jesus Christ lived a perfect life in our place, died on the cross for our sins

bearing God's full wrath for us, and rose again on the third day, crushing our Sin, the accusations and tyranny of Satan, and even death itself under his feet - because this gospel is true, we are dead to the law, dead to our sin, dead to the flesh, dead to the world - and therefore, we are alive in Christ! IN Christ, you're forgiven and redeemed! In Christ, you're justified! In Christ, you have peace and mercy from God, for you are part of the "Israel of God" - God's beloved children, God's redeemed people! In Christ, we have the full assurance that we are a New Creation, we are righteous, and the full blessings of eternal life are ours, as God's people!

And this is *all by grace through faith in Christ alone, not works!* And so, it is very fitting that Paul ends the letter with a benediction, a prayer wish, of grace to us, in v.18: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your Spirit, brothers. Amen." The grace of our Lord Jesus is the very essence of this letter - the very core of the message of the gospel. We receive salvation by grace; not by our works, not something we do or earn, but is God's free gift to us. Jesus paid it all for us on the cross, and we just receive it by grace through faith in Him alone! Therefore, this grace is what defines us; and Christ's grace will be with us. So let us not boast in the flesh, brothers and sisters, but only in the cross of Christ! Let us look to the cross of Christ every single day, preaching this gospel to ourselves and believing it! Let us remember that we're not defined by the world, by the flesh, by our failures, or even our successes! Let us remember that on our best day and on our worst day, our only hope is the finished work of Jesus Christ, and it is more than enough! Let us remember our identity: we are God's redeemed and saved people, and it is *all by grace!*

Therefore, this glorious good news is for *anyone!* No one is too bad or too good for the gospel! We all need it. So if you're not a believer this morning, the good news is, this grace can be yours today! Simply turn away from sin, from trusting in yourself, from the world, or any false beliefs, and simply turn to Christ, trusting in Him alone! Turn to the cross and believe that nothing else matters other than the fact that Jesus Christ lived, died for your sins, and was raised to save you from your sins! Trust in Christ, and God's mercy, peace, and grace will be with you, and you will be raised to eternal life! And that new life begins right now! So begin it by trusting in Christ alone, then profess your faith through baptism as you declare that you're part of God's people - the Church. If you have any questions about this, I would love to speak with you. Let us pray.