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Galatians 5:2-12

The Offensive Message of the Cross of Christ

One of my favorite authors of all time (outside of the Bible, of course) is C.S. Lewis, who was a British professor and Christian author in the first half of the 1900s. One of his most influential works was *Mere Christianity*. And one chapter in that book is titled “The Great Sin.” He’s answering the question, “What lies at the root of all our sin? What drives us when we sin? What sin lies at the root of all our other sins?” Here is what Lewis says: “There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which every one in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. ... The vice I am talking of is Pride or Self-Conceit... the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride... Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.”¹

Lewis was saying that *pride* lives in each of our hearts and is at the root of every other sin. That our own pride, selfishness, and love of self is what drives our sinning and is the very opposite of a life of faith in God. And I’m inclined to think Lewis was right. To have human flesh is to know the inevitable allure of pride. Pride is the love of self, that desire to see ourselves exalted and justified in the eyes of others. And pride doesn't just mean that you *think* you’re great and glorious - it's simply the *desire* to be seen as great, glorious, and praise-worthy by others. Pride can be seen in the boastful man and the self-pitying man; both are overly concerned with self. And this same pride that all of us have to fight in our hearts is the very reason why we’re all tempted towards legalism and works-based righteousness. Pride can be seen in the man who thinks he’s too good to need religion, or in the man who thinks he's too bad for religion, or in the man who thinks he can become good *by* religious works.

In our pride, we hate being wrong; we love being right. We don’t want our weaknesses and failures to be exposed; we cover them up. On the flip side, we want our strengths, talents, and achievements to be recognized and praised by others. In our pride, we think we know what’s best for us - not someone else, not even God. And this is exactly why the gospel - the message of the cross of Christ - is *so offensive*. In our flesh, we are continuously attracted to the anti-gospel

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p.122.

message of works-based righteousness; it tells us, “You’re really not that bad” “You really are a pretty good person, you’re definitely better than most people you know; how could God not be pleased with you!” “You could be better than this; you know you’re better than this; if you only stop doing this, and start doing that, then you’ll finally be good enough!” This message is attractive to us, in our flesh, as a way to dismiss and justify our sin; this message says, “That sin you feel so guilty about, it’s not that bad! That wasn’t really gossip, you were just telling the truth, because you are such a good and honest person! That lust in your heart, that’s not your fault! And after all, you’re not hurting anybody!” “You can’t be blamed for these sins - it’s everyone else’s fault! Don’t they see how hard you try, how much you do?” “You do all these other good things, these good works of righteousness - what’s the big deal that you have a little sin in your life? Everyone makes mistakes - but that doesn’t mean you’re not good, that doesn’t mean you’re not still righteous!” These are sneaky lies from Satan that sound so good to our prideful flesh. They appeal to us because we so desperately want to be justified - that is, *we want who we are, what we do, what we think, say, and believe, to be justified!* We want to be *exalted*. We want to be seen in the right! And that means we *don’t* want to be seen in the wrong; we *don’t* want to be seen as failures and not good enough; we *don’t* want to be judged - not even by God. We don’t want to be called sinners! And that’s exactly why the message of the gospel is so offensive.

But that’s exactly why we need to keep hearing gospel, over and over again. Our hearts are like a forest, and the gospel clears a path through our hearts to Jesus; but the weeds and vines of pride and legalism constantly threaten to overgrow that path in our hearts. So we need to constantly take the machete of the gospel and keep hacking away at those vines and weeds, keeping that path clear. And that’s exactly what Paul is doing for us, here in Galatians 5:2-12. Last week we saw a dense and complicated theological argument from Paul, as he argued from the scriptures as to why the Galatian Christians should stand firm and the freedom of the gospel and not give in to the false teachings of slavery to the Law, to works-based righteousness. Now, Paul gives a more rhetorical, emotionally provocative appeal for why they should stand firm and not give in to slavery. And he doesn’t pull any punches while he does so.

He begins by once again making it crystal clear why it is so important not to give in to works-based righteousness: it is because *salvation itself* is at stake.

I. If we Seek to be Justified by Works, we will be Severed from Christ (5:2-4)

Paul begins the passage with a sharp, sobering warning in vv.2-4: “Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.”

Once again we come to one of the main thrusts of Paul’s letter to the Galatians: he is warning them, over and over again, in different ways, not to give in to the false teachings of the Judaizers, who preached an anti-gospel of Jesus *plus* works equals righteousness before God and salvation. These false teachers were Jews who professed faith in Christ, but then came down to these new churches in Galatia, where lots of non-Jewish Gentiles (people just like us) were turning away from sin and idolatry and turning to Christ in faith, trusting in the gospel for salvation, purely by grace alone! But these false teachers from Jerusalem, the Judaizers, began telling them that this wasn’t enough - that yes, they needed to believe in the gospel of Christ, but if they really wanted to be saved, if they really wanted to be justified, to be righteous before God and receive the inheritance of eternal life, then they *also* needed to become good Jews - that they needed to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses. But that’s not the gospel! In fact, it’s a *denial* of the gospel. It’s not trusting in Christ alone for salvation - it’s works-based righteousness, thinking that we have to contribute to our righteousness before God with our own works of obedience. And that’s a *false gospel*. It’s works-based righteousness; it’s self-justification, trying to be righteous before God in your own works.

Paul makes this abundantly clear: if these Galatian believers accept circumcision, they’ll be doing so because they are buying into the false teaching that they need to put themselves under the Law in order to really be righteous before God and be saved. And if they do so, they’ll be yoking themselves under slavery to the full demands of the Law-Covenant of Moses; as verse 3 says, everyone who is circumcised “is obligated to keep the whole law.” Now, clearly, it’s not the cutting away of flesh that is spiritually significant in this way. We practice circumcision today for medical reasons; that doesn’t mean that we are all under the Law! As Paul will say in verse 6, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything.” So what’s the big deal, then? Why does it matter? It matters because the Galatians would be getting circumcised not for medical reasons, or even cultural reasons, but in order to truly be justified before God - to truly be *righteous* before God and be saved. And if they do so, they can’t stop at circumcision; they will be obligated to keep the entire Law. If they get circumcised, or start

doing *any of the works of the Law*, as part of the basis for their justification and righteousness before God, then they are saying that they want God to judge them *based on their obedience to the Law*. And if we approach God that way, then we better watch out: because God demands *perfect righteousness!*

Paul's warning here is clear: if the Galatians think that have to start keeping the Law in order to truly be righteous before God, then they are buying into the lie of *works-based righteousness*; they are relying on their own works to be justified, not relying on CHrist's grace alone! And if that's the case, then "Christ is of no advantage" to them! In fact, he says it even more harshly, in verse 4: "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace." The Galatians professed faith in the gospel. Paul says they were "running well" (v.7). But none of that matters if they fall away from the true gospel now. If they truly believe, then they will not fall into works-based righteousness, but will stand firm in the gospel of grace; this is why Paul says, in v.10, "I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view." If they are truly believers, the Lord will hold them fast. But if they yoke themselves to the Law, then they will be damned. It doesn't matter if they profess faith in the gospel of Christ; if they start relying on works of the Law to contribute to their righteousness, then it shows that they *don't understand the gospel at all*, that they aren't trusting in Christ alone for salvation, and therefore, they aren't righteous before GOd at all! And we might object and say, "How can you say that? If they profess faith in Christ and say the gospel, then why is it such a big deal if they get circumcised, too? Sure, it's *Jeus plus* works for justification - but at least they still believe in Jesus, right?" But that's exactly the point: *no, they don't!* They are buying into the lie that Jesus's life, death, and resurrection *weren't enough* to save them!

This warning isn't just for the Galatians. Getting circumcised to be under the Law of Moses isn't the only form of works-based righteousness. We do the same anytime we start to think that our relationship with God or our standing before Him is based on whether or not we commit certain sins, on how much we obey, or do good things, or give, or pray, or so on and so forth. When we start to measure how righteous we are based on how much we do or don't do, then we're falling into the trap of works-based righteousness. Lots of people think they are righteous before God because they were baptized, or because they're name is on a church roll, or because their family members are Christians, or because they do religious rituals, like confessions and mass and hail Mary's - but none of that saves you! None of that makes you

righteous! It's worthless slavery to works-based righteousness! If we start relying on our own works to contribute towards righteousness in any way - if we start to think that being a Christian and being saved has *anything to do* with us being a good person and obeying God enough - then it shows that we don't understand or believe the gospel *at all!* To buy into works-based righteousness is to buy into the lie that Jesus's life, death, and resurrection *aren't enough* to save us from our sins! It's to buy into the lie that Jesus's righteousness isn't good enough for us! And if we deny the sufficiency of the cross then we are severed from Christ completely.

And that's because faith in the cross of Christ is the *only path* to righteousness. Which brings us to point 2...

II. We are Justified through Spirit-Empowered Faith in Christ Alone (5:5-6)

After being warned that the path of works-based righteousness only leads to condemnation, Paul shows us the only path that truly leads to righteousness and salvation: *spirit-empowered faith in Christ*. Verse 5 says, "For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness." Using the word "we" he speaks to those of us who are truly Christians: we don't rely on our own works in order to *make ourselves righteous*; we know that we could never be righteous before God! Instead, we look not to ourselves, but to *the righteousness of Christ*. We "eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness." That is, we eagerly wait for the day when we will stand before the Lord and will be *declared* righteous. He doesn't say we have a present righteousness in ourselves - we don't. We're not righteous, we're sinners. And yet, we have a sure, certain hope that we will nonetheless *be declared righteous before God on the day of judgment, entering into eternal salvation!* How can we have such a bold, audacious hope, even being eager for that day, when we know we have no righteousness to offer? It's because we're not trusting in ourselves, not basing any of it on our own obedience or disobedience. Instead, we're hoping in the righteousness of God that comes *through faith by grace in Jesus Christ alone!*

To pursue works-based righteousness is to rely on the flesh - to trust in yourself. But to pursue the righteousness of Christ through faith, simply by trusting in what Christ has done *for you*, is to walk by the Spirit, not the flesh. For true faith in Christ doesn't come from us; it's not natural to us, it's actually *counter-intuitive* to the way we naturally think! And this is why Paul says that it is "through the Spirit" that we eagerly wait for the righteousness that comes through faith. That is to say, true faith in Christ comes by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in

our lives. True faith is *Spirit-empowered* faith. To truly trust in Christ is to be born again of the Spirit; when we become Christians, we're born again, we receive New HEarts and become brand new people, all because the Holy Spirit enters us and changes us! AND in fact, I think what Paul is saying here is that true, saving faith itself doesn't come from us - it comes from the Spirit of God, who empowers us to truly believe, empowering us to eagerly hope for the righteousness of God *through faith in Christ alone!* The only path to righteousness before God is to trust in what Christ has done for us, not in ourselves; to trust that Jesus's life, death, and resurrection is truly sufficient to save us from our sins and declare us righteous before God! And even our faith itself is not ultimately from us, not even something we ourselves can produce by the flesh; even true faith comes *by the power of the Spirit.* True, saving faith is Spirit-empowered faith in the gospel, that we are saved by grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ alone!

And since true faith is Spirit-empowered, coming from the Spirit and not us, this means that true, saving faith in Christ visibly demonstrates itself "through love." We see this in verse 6: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love." We don't obey in order to be justified; we obey *because we have been justified!* We obey out of *love.* But this doesn't mean that obedience to Christ is just a nice, optional feature of the Christian life, as if you can strive to obey Christ if you want, but you don't have to. Rather, what Paul is saying here is that *true, saving faith* in Christ visibly demonstrates itself *through love* - love for God and love for others. And as Jesus says in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." If we're truly trusting in Christ alone for salvation, through the power of the Spirit, then we will live changed lives; we will strive to put off sin and obey God in all things! But *why* we obey is crucially different; we obey *out of love!* We don't obey *in order to be justified;* we obey *out of love for Christ,* who loved us so much that he died for us, that we can be raised and declared righteous purely by grace through faith in Him!

Paul is going to spend the rest of this letter talking about what Spirit-empowered "faith working through love" looks like. But first, he has to conclude his sharp warning and rebuke, making sure that before he moves on to exhortations to obedience, we understand very clearly that our obedience *in no way* contributes to our righteousness to his warning, bringing us to point 3...

III. Those Who Believe and Teach Works-Based Righteousness Will be Judged by God (vv.7-10, 12)

Paul continues his sharp warning and rebuke in vv.7-10: “You were running well. WHO hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you, A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view. And the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.” As Paul circles back to his pointed rebuke and warning, he’s making a very similar point to what we saw above, in verses 2-4. He laments that the Galatians Christians, who were “running so well” in the gospel of Christ are now being led astray towards embracing the false gospel of justification through works. But though this point is very similar to the first point we saw today, here Paul is coming at it from a different angle, making a slightly different point: now, he’s speaking severely against the false teachers themselves.

He makes it clear that these false teachers, these Judaizers preaching Jesus *plus righteousness through works of the Law*, are not Christian teachers but are *false teachers*. Their “persuasion” is “not from him who calls you” (v.9); that is, their message is not from God. And lest we just dismiss them as a vocal minority, Paul makes it clear that false teachers will do irreparable damage if left unchecked; after all, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (v.9). These false teachers are corrupting and changing the gospel and leading these Christians and churches astray - leading them not to God, and not even to slightly off beliefs, but toward *denying the gospel*, and that means, to Hell. As Paul says in v.10, “the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.” These false teachers are denying the gospel, and leading others to deny the gospel through their false teachings. If they don’t repent, they - and all who listen to Him - will face the eternal wrath and judgment of God. AND this leads Paul to his most impassioned, rhetorically *provocative* statement of the whole letter, in v.12: “I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!” That is, if these false teachers are so obsessed with cutting foreskin, they might as well not stop there but should emasculate themselves completely from Christ! Paul doesn’t mess around here; he doesn’t mince words. And neither should we.

There are lots of false teachers in our day. There are many religious groups - many of whom claim to be Christians - that teach that salvation comes from believing in Christ *plus* doing lots of religious rituals and good works. There are even many who claim to be evangelical Christians who are very legalistic and think Christianity is all about a list of rules you follow and

religious rituals you perform. But when these kinds of people start having an influence in our churches, or when our friends and family become enslaved works-based righteousness, sometimes we're afraid to speak so strongly against them. Or to ask it bluntly: are we willing to be as brave and bold as Paul is here? Are we willing to be so bold in warning those we love against falling into the damnable traps of legalism and works-based righteousness? We can't just agree to disagree. We can't just say, "Well, I think that's wrong, but if it works for them..." We can't say that. Because it *won't* work for them. It doesn't work for anyone. Works-based righteousness doesn't bring righteousness - it brings the condemnation and judgment of God.

But holding firm to this conviction can be difficult, because...

IV. The Cross of Christ is an Offensive Message (5:11)

A large part of what Paul is doing here is making it clear that the gospel of Christ he preaches is not the same as the false gospel that these Judaizers preach. The gospel is that salvation comes by grace through faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ alone! The false gospel is that salvation comes through faith *plus* works. But it's very possible that these false teachers might have said something like, "Listen, this is the same gospel Paul believes in - he just didn't teach you this part yet; we're just continuing your discipleship, teaching you the rest of the gospel!" But in verse 11, Paul makes clear this isn't the case and they know it. He says, "But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed."

The false teachers knew very well that their false gospel was different from Paul's; that's why they attacked his character, why other Jews persecuted him for sharing the gospel. It's because the message of the gospel of Christ, the message of the gospel, is *offensive*. And this is still just as true for us, today. The message of the gospel that we believe, preach, and celebrate is an *offensive message* to the flesh, and to the non-believing world around us - even to the very *religious* world around us.

We live in a day and age of "self-exaltation" and "self-justification." Proudful boasting and self-exaltation isn't looked down upon in our society - it's acceptable, it's expected, it's even lauded and praised. We see this everywhere from the gospel according to Disney - "just believe in yourself" - to selfies on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram where you can present a glamorous, manicured version of your life to everyone (which can easily be a temptation for pride and self-exaltation). We're even told that this is just how you have to be in order to get ahead and life

and thrive. If you've ever been given advice on how to ace a job interview, you've probably been told the popular advice that when they ask about strengths and weaknesses, you should only give weaknesses that you can turn into strengths, so that you can really "sell yourself." The world is constantly proclaiming a message of self-justification, self-exaltation, self-righteousness. And our sinful flesh just naturally eats it up, like catnip.

And then the gospel of the cross comes along and completely dashes that narrative to pieces! The message of the cross is *utterly offensive* to the ways of the flesh and the world - because it is a message of *anti-self*.

In our pride, we hate being wrong; we love being right. We all want to be justified - we all want who we are, what we say, what we do, to be justified, to be declared right. We hate being told that we're wrong or that we need to change. We hate being told that we're not good enough, that we're failures, that we don't understand the truth, that we don't have the right information. We hate to be judged - we love to have ourselves vindicated and justified! And that means we hate to be told we're sinners. But that's exactly what the gospel tells us - we are sinners; everyone is. We've all failed, we've all fallen short of the glory of God. None of us are good enough and we never can be! The offensive message of the cross is that we are sinners who will stand under the judgment of a perfectly righteous God and no matter how hard we try and what we do, we could never be good enough; we're all evil and deserve Hell. And that's an offensive message, isn't it? It cuts right against our pride.

Yet it's also a glorious message. Because it tells us that the path to glory is not through pride, but humility. That the path to righteousness is not through good works, but through realizing and confessing our weakness and sinfulness. That the path to life is through death. The message of the cross is that we deserve death, yet *Christ died in our place, bearing the wrath of God we deserve!* The message of the cross is that eternal life is ours, but only if we *die to ourselves*, being crucified with Christ through faith! The message of the Cross is that you and I could never be good enough, but Christ was *good enough for us!* That His righteousness is ours purely by grace through faith!

And this message of the cross is gloriously freeing, isn't it? Because it tells us that on your best day, and on your worst, your only hope is what Christ did for you - and it is more than enough! The message of the cross is that no matter how messed up and broken you are, no matter how sinful you are, no matter how prideful and legalistic your flesh may be, in Christ *none of*

that matters! All that matters is what Jesus Christ lived, died, and was raised in our place, and if you're trusting in Him, you are *justified* - you are righteous, you are saved! Don't believe in yourself; don't trust in what you do or don't do; trust in what Christ has done for you!

And this means that if you're not a Christian this morning, you don't have to clean yourself up or get your life together; you can come to Christ today! Simply trust that Jesus *loves you!* That Jesus died and was raised *for you!* That Christ's righteousness is *for you!* Not by works, but by grace through faith! Just rest in Christ, and you will be saved! Then, make your faith public through baptism. If you have any questions about this, please come and speak with me. Let us pray.