Today is the last Sunday I will be preaching from the New International Version. I love this version, and it has been my go-to Bible since it was first published 27 years ago. Next week when we start a new series on 1 and 2 Thessalonians Josh and I will both be preaching from the English Standard Version. As we noted in a recent email to the congregation, this change has been forced upon us by the publishers of the NIV. They revised the NIV extensively and no longer publish the 1984 version we’ve been using. They made 33,000 changes, most of which are excellent and none heretical, to my knowledge.

However, since we will have to switch to a new translation when our current Bibles wear out, we asked ourselves if there might be a better one than the 2010 version of the NIV. Our staff and elders have concluded that the ESV is probably a little better, not so much for public reading as for personal study, in that it conforms a little more closely to the original text. In fact, the ESV Study Bible, which is big enough to give you a hernia, is an amazing Bible study tool. I encourage you to get one, but you’ll also need to get a smaller version to carry around with you. We will put the Scripture text on the screen for the coming year so that everyone can read from the same text.

**Introduction:** It's been a long and somewhat methodical journey through the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians. Six chapters in six months! But it's been an exciting trip. The topic of God's grace is dealt with so forcefully and effectively in this book that one cannot escape the overwhelming truth that no matter how great and noble one’s effort, no matter how carefully one observes religious rules and regulations, no one can get right with God or stay right with God through his own merit. We are saved by grace and we grow in grace. Outside of God's grace there is no hope!

One of the most interesting facts about the book of Galatians is that in the conclusion of this letter Paul refrains from his usual custom of giving greetings to various friends and discussing future travel plans. In some of his letters, like 1 Corinthians and Romans he devotes virtually the entire last chapter to such. But in this letter he has not wasted a single word on the niceties found in conventional letters, and the conclusion is no exception. He uses it to reemphasize some of the key truths he has addressed previously. Our text is Galatians 6:11 to the end of the book:

> See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!
> 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. Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh. 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. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.
> Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.
> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.
The Apostle draws attention to two unusual things about the conclusion to his letter. First, he's writing it himself. Paul invariably used a scribe or a secretary to write his letters, but now he takes the pen from the scribe's hand to give added emphasis and authority. It's as though he is saying, “Let no one suggest this letter is a forgery and therefore its content heretical. I am writing the conclusion myself. I am autographing it to prove its authenticity.”

The second fact he calls attention to is the size of the letters with which he writes; they are large. There are at least two possible explanations for this—one is sarcastic emphasis. “I'm writing large enough so that even those of you who are spiritually blind can see it!” Or it may be a reference to the Apostle's own near physical blindness. We cannot be sure.

What is not in doubt, however, is that Paul is adding every possible bit of leverage to the important truths he is about to summarize. His point is, “DON'T MISS THIS!” He then offers us a warning, an affirmation, an exhortation, a testimony, and a benediction.

A final warning about the legalists (12-13)

We may feel we have heard enough about legalism. But Paul thinks not. It is such a pervasive, insidious disease that we must be constantly on the lookout for it. Legalism reminds me of crabgrass or Bermuda grass. About the only way to eliminate it is to get it in early March before it starts its active growing season. Once it begins to flourish the only thing that will kill it is a herbicide like Roundup, so powerful that it kills the grass too. Trying to weed out legalism from a church where it is well rooted may kill that church, so Paul offers preventive medicine in the form of a strong warning. Four charges are leveled at the legalists.

1. Their doctrine is false. It's false because its focus is outward instead of inward. Verse 12 says, “They want to make a good impression outwardly.” They emphasize the externals of the faith rather than the internals. They are far more concerned about whether a man is circumcised in the flesh than whether he is circumcised in the heart. They put more emphasis upon what we do for God rather than what He has already done for us.

2. Their methodology is coercive. In verse 12 we read that “they are trying to compel you to be circumcised.” Legalists are never satisfied to follow a set of rules and standards for themselves; they insist that everyone else do the same. If they can't achieve that end through biblical teaching and reason, they try to achieve it through pressure and intimidation. “If you want to be a part of our group, you will follow our rules or else!”

I am a firm believer that when you have truth on your side you don't need coercion. The Bible serves as its own authority, and when you can open the Bible and show a person, “This is what the Lord says,” that is all the authority you need. If you can’t show them that, then you have no business insisting on your view in the first place.

3. Their actions are hypocritical. Look at 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.” There is an inevitable, built-in hypocrisy to legalism. Legalism says, “You must do in order to achieve God's favor,” but the
simple fact is that because God is infinitely holy and people are finite and sinful by nature, they can never be sure they have done enough. So, they end up picking and choosing among God’s laws and always end up like the Pharisees, to whom Jesus said,

“You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.”

(Matt. 23:23ff)

In our day, too, there are those in the Church who pay great lip service to the Law, but in the process always reveal their own hypocrisy. They make sure they attend services faithfully, make a big show of their faith, and perhaps even serve in some ministry capacity in the church, but questions like these are avoided: Do I pride myself on not being divorced, yet my spouse and kids are bleeding for lack of emotional support? Do I tell my kids honesty is the best policy while I cheat on my taxes or lack integrity in my business? Do I denounce drugs at the same time I abuse alcohol? The legalist’s actions are inherently hypocritical.

4. Their motives are disgraceful. Paul points out two wrong motives. The first is mentioned in verse 12: “The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.” Think about that for a moment. What is it about the cross that invites persecution? Well, the Cross speaks some very unsavory truths about mankind. Every time we look at the Cross, Christ seems to say to us,

I am here because of you.
It is your sin I am bearing,
your curse I am suffering,
your debt I am paying,
your death I am dying.

Nothing in history or in the universe cuts us down to size like the Cross.

Persecution for the Galatians probably came principally from fellow-Jews. They considered the Christian faith a cult, and they persecuted their own who converted. What enraged them most was the substitution of the Cross for the Mosaic Law as the means of salvation. So the legalists reasoned, “Perhaps we will suffer less persecution if we add the Mosaic Law to the Cross. Besides, people need to feel like they are contributing something to their salvation, so we'll combine Christ and Moses and thus keep both sides happy.” What a tragic miscalculation! To add anything to the Cross is to utterly destroy Christianity. But there’s another disgraceful motive ascribed to the legalists in verse 13. The Judaizers, it says, “want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh.” They are counting their converts, padding their statistics. If at the Annual Church Conference in Jerusalem they can claim 350 circumcisions for the preceding year, it will go a long way to boosting their standing and probably their salary.

Statistics are often more of a bane than a blessing to the Church. One can get a terribly inaccurate picture of the health of a church by looking too much at the number of conversions or baptisms, the size of the offerings, or the attendance. We should want to see more people coming to church not so we can count people but because people count. But in the process we must be careful not to “use people” to further our own selfish pride. That is what legalists do.

A final affirmation of the Cross (14-16)
It is here the Apostle comes to the heart of our faith. In contrast to the legalists who try to avoid persecution for the Cross, Paul declares, “May I never boast except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” For him the Cross was the ultimate source of glory, and for every believing Christian it should be ours as well.

**It is our ultimate source of glory.** The Apostle Paul had a lot to boast about. He was a brilliant thinker, a dedicated evangelist, a world-class missionary, a leader of people. But listen to what he wrote in Phil. 3 (quoted from Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, *The Message*):

> Steer clear of the barking dogs, those religious busybodies, all bark and no bite. All they’re interested in is appearances–knife-happy circumcisers, I call them. The real believers are the ones the Spirit of God leads to work away at this ministry, filling the air with Christ’s praise as we do it. We couldn’t carry this off by our own efforts, and we know it—even though we can list what many might think are impressive credentials.

> You know my pedigree: a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent to God’s law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting Christians; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God’s law Book.

> The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I’m tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I’ve dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. I didn’t want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ—God’s righteousness.

> I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.

All that is summarized in Galatians 6:14: “May I never boast except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Some of the greatest hymns in Christendom have communicated this same truth. But instead of me reading these verses I asked Andy if he would come and lead us together in singing them. Now I’m not through preaching yet; I’m just asking you to participate with me in the sermon. Think about every word as you sing:

> O that old rugged cross so despised by the world
> Has a wondrous attraction for me.
> For the dear lamb of God
> Left His glory above
> To bear it to dark Calvary.

> So I’ll cherish the old rugged cross,
> Till my trophies at last I lay down.
> I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown.

Beneath the cross of Jesus I fain would take my stand.
The shadow of a mighty Rock within a weary land.
A home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way,
From the burning of the noontide heat, and the burden of the day.

I take, O Cross, thy shadow for my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of His face,
Content to let the world go by, to know no gain or loss,
My sinful self my only shame, my glory all the cross.

Jesus, keep me near the cross—there a precious fountain,
Free to all, a healing stream, flows from Calvary's mountain.
In the cross, in the cross, be my glory ever,
Til my raptured soul shall find rest beyond the river.

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

All I once held dear, built my life upon,
All this world reveres, and wars to own,
All I once thought gain I have counted loss;
Spent and worthless now, compared to this.

Knowing You, Jesus, knowing You,
There is no greater thing.
You're my all, You're the best,
You're my joy, my righteousness,
And I love You, Lord.

This the power of the cross:
Christ became sin for us.
Took the blame, bore the wrath,
We stand forgiven at the cross.

Friends, what does it mean to glory in the Cross? Does it mean we have one on the steeple of our church building? Does it mean we wear one around our neck? I have a pair of socks with a cross on them. Does that prove I glory in it? For many wearing a cross may be nothing more than a sentimental attachment to a religious symbol. But to the first century Christian the Cross was not a beautiful piece of jewelry; it was the lowest form of death and the ultimate humiliation.

Paul identifies himself with the Cross and accepts the consequences of the Cross for his own life. In fact, he states right here in verse 14, “through the Cross the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.” This is actually the third time the believer’s crucifixion has been mentioned in Galatians. In 2:20 Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me.” In 5:24, he testifies about the crucifixion of our sinful natures. Now in 6:14 he claims the Cross as an instrument of crucifixion in respect to the relationship between the believer and the world.
I think he means that because of the Cross, we and the world have parted company. Previous to conversion many of us were desperately anxious to be accepted by the world, i.e. the society of unbelievers. But once we see ourselves as hell-deserving sinners and Christ crucified as our sin-bearer, we are no longer consumed by what the world thinks or says of us (or does to us).

**Its immeasurably outweighs all other symbols of our faith.** Verse 15 reads, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.” To paraphrase, circumcision isn't going to get you into heaven and lack of circumcision isn't going to keep you out of heaven. What counts is whether you’ve become a new creation by being born again through the death of Christ.

Now this isn’t intended as a denunciation of circumcision. Circumcision was given to Abraham by God as a sign of the covenant. And contrary to the views of a vocal minority of the medical community today, it is not a useless pagan ritual to torture little boys; it is a healthy practice, and in biblical times it was a valuable sign of ownership. But it was never designed to save anyone from sin. Yet the legalists had elevated it to a place of central importance, insisting that without it nobody could be saved. That’s palpably ridiculous! How could any outward and bodily operation secure the salvation of one’s soul?

Yet the same mistake is made today by those who attach an exaggerated importance to baptism. Baptism is good; it is important; Christ gave baptism to the church, just as God gave circumcision to Abraham. Baptism, too, is a valuable sign of Christ’s ownership over a person’s life. But however great and spiritual are the truths which baptism signifies, it is itself an outward and bodily act, and it is absurd to magnify it to the place of an indispensable means of salvation. Likewise it’s absurd to boast about “so many baptisms” in a given year.

Circumcision, baptism, confirmation—these are all signs and seals of the fact that a person has been born again and is now a new creation. But it is a lamentable tragedy when we become so topsy-turvy in our thinking that we substitute the sign for the thing signified, magnify a bodily ceremony at the expense of a change of heart, and consider these the way of salvation, rather than the Cross.

Think for a moment about how we might paraphrase verse 15 to make it of utmost practicality in our lives:

*Neither a Seminary degree nor an ordination certificate nor an elected office in the church means anything; what counts is being born again.*

*Neither church attendance nor tithing nor even using our Saturdays to work at the Lady Bugg House means anything; what counts is being born again.*

*Neither the Apostles’ Creed nor the Westminster Confession nor even the 10-point Free Church Doctrinal Statement means anything; what counts is being born again.*

*Neither the sign of the fish nor Jesus First pins nor WWJD wrist bands mean anything; what counts is being born again.*
The Cross immeasurably outweighs all other symbols of our faith.

**A final exhortation to the church (16)**

“Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.” The word “rule” in this verse is the Greek word from which we get our English word “canon”, (not the weapon kind but the legal kind). A canon is a criterion or a standard of judgment. We speak of the canon of Scripture as the 66 books which have met the criteria for acceptance as divine revelation. Here Paul says the church has a canon.

**The church has a “measuring rod.”** What is it? Since he refers to it as this rule, it is obviously something he has just spoken of, and I would suggest that it is the Gospel of salvation by the Cross of Christ. The measuring rod of orthodoxy must always be the simple truth that Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scripture and that He was buried, and that He was raised again on the third day, according to the Scriptures.

**Benefits accrue to those who pay attention to the measuring rod.** “Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule.” Notice the benefits are not health and wealth, not ease and leisure, but peace and mercy. Peace is the calm assurance that God is in control even when chaos seems to reign temporarily. But peace is impossible for either individuals or churches when they depart from the Gospel.

Mercy, the other benefit, is the unmerited favor of God for those who deserve the opposite. That includes all of us. It includes this church. By keeping our minds, our lives, and our church focused on the Gospel of the Cross and its ability to do for us what we could never do for ourselves, God's peace and mercy are allowed free reign in us and among us.

The phrase, “Israel of God,” may refer to those members of the Jewish race who were true believers in Christ. But it may also be a synonym for the Church. Either way the point seems clear that everyone, Jew or Gentile, must walk by the measuring rod, the Gospel. We must come by way of the Cross if we are going to experience the peace and mercy of God.

**A final testimony from the apostle (17)**

“Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.” In other words, “You legalists, get off my back. I have your sacred mark of circumcision on my body, but I’ve got some marks on my body that are of far more value.” The term for “marks” in Greek is “stigmata.” The medieval church taught that these marks were identical to the scars in the hands, feet and side of Jesus, which appeared in Paul’s body by sympathetic identification with Him. Hundreds of saints down through the years have claimed to bear the stigmata. I don’t know whether they have or haven’t. I don’t know whether these stigmata were self-inflicted or just appeared miraculously. But I am pretty sure this is not what Paul is talking about.

The marks he is referring to are the scars he received while being tortured for Jesus' sake. Listen to his testimony from 2 Cor. 11:23-25:

*Are these critics of mine servants of Christ? I am more. 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 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.

These are the real marks of Jesus. Persecution, not circumcision, not baptism, and not confirmation, is the authentic Christian tattoo. Now I don’t think we have to have the scars of torture in order to have real faith. I think the marks of Jesus are evident in other ways. When someone asks us, “What is the evidence that your faith is real?” it does no good to say, “Well, I was baptized in 1968” or “I joined the church after confirmation class when I was 13.” Or even that “I invited Jesus into my life at age 6.” They're asking for evidence.

It is meaningful, however, to say as I’ve heard individuals in this church say, “I've lost two children, but I'm still trusting God because I know He loves Me.” Or, “I was propositioned at work, but by God’s grace I was able to find the way of escape that God has provided to every temptation.” Or, “I was addicted to alcohol (or pornography), but I have experienced God’s forgiveness and have found victory.” Or even, “Slowly but surely I am beginning to see the fruit of the Spirit develop in my life.”

Do you have in your life any of the true marks of the Lord Jesus? Have you been branded? Is it obvious to whom you belong?

A final benediction for all believers (18)

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.” Our book started with grace, it ends with grace, and the pages in between are permeated with grace. Paul's legacy is a wish that the grace of God would be increasingly realized in our spirits. It's not sufficient to know about God's grace mentally or even emotionally. And it's certainly not sufficient to have made what are merely outward decisions to follow Christ. The issue is the inner person. What have you, in the deepest recesses of your heart, done with Jesus?

I want to give you an opportunity to settle that this morning. Very simply let me lay out the plan of salvation. It begins with a problem, a really big problem. We are all sinners, and the wages of sin is death—eternal separation from God. But He has provided a solution. He sent His one and only Son, Jesus, who had no sin, to offer His own life in exchange for ours. He paid our penalty on the Cross. His death is sufficient to save everyone.

God doesn’t require us to perform any rites or rituals or penance. But He does require us to turn from our sin and receive Jesus as our personal Savior. By an act of our will we must renounce all efforts to save ourselves and cast ourselves completely on the grace and mercy of God.

I want to pray a sinner’s prayer, and if this expresses the desire of your heart, won’t you pray it quietly after me?

Father, I know that I am a sinner. I have missed the mark and violated Your standards. I understand also that the wages of sin is death—spiritual separation from You. Thank You for sending Your one and only Son to die for me on the Cross, to pay my penalty, and to offer me forgiveness of my sins. I accept Your offer. I invite Jesus Christ into my life to be my Savior. I
also want Him to be the Lord and Master of my life. Thank You, Father. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer, I would love to know it so we can pray for you and offer you help in your spiritual growth. You can use the card in the pew rack in front of you to communicate with us.


ii. More broadly, the canon would apply to the Bible itself. This is just another way of saying the criterion for our faith is the Book. Many times I have sat down with people facing a difficult dilemma. Their church, to which they had devoted years of faithful service, was no longer teaching the Word of God in a clear, straightforward fashion. Denominational doctrine, some of it false, was being elevated instead to the place of the “measuring rod.” New theologies, church tradition, or rites and rituals were replacing the Cross as the focal point. Liturgy was becoming more important than the new birth. It has happened many times in history. Entire denominations have succumbed. It could happen to us. We must guard carefully against it.