

Good Bye

Galatians 6:11-18

This afternoon we say “Good bye” to the book of Galatians, and I hope that you can do so with a clear understanding of the purpose for which Paul wrote. That there was a significant problem in the church became clear right at the outset.

Gal. 1:6 “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— 7 not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.”

So this book is all about Paul responding to the proclamation of a different gospel, a false gospel, whose preachers are to be accursed. After defending his own rights as an apostle, Paul gets right down to the matter at hand, namely the doctrine of justification. How is a man justified? How is it that a holy God would justify a guilty sinner, not only forgiving him his sins but also crediting to him righteousness. It is a righteousness by faith, and a forgiveness of sins granted by grace to be received by faith. The performance of good works in obedience to the law has no part in this justification.

Gal. 2:16 “... yet 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... 21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.”

The focal point of that doctrinal discussion was upon something very, very practical. Namely, circumcision. The necessity of the Old Covenant sign and seal being continued in the New Covenant. And those who taught that it was were the ones at the cross-hairs of Paul’s strenuous objections. And he warns the church,

Gal. 5:1 “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. 2 Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. 3 I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. 4 You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.”

The alternative is then declared by Paul, the true gospel.

Gal. 5:5 “For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. 6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.”

As he concludes this letter, Paul gets to the heart of the matter, the heart of those teaching this dangerous form of legalism or works-righteousness. And the heart of the matter is the motivation.

I. THE MOTIVATION FOR LEGALISM.

Why were these teachers of circumcision teaching what they were teaching? Why did they teach the necessity of circumcision? What was the motivation? Why would they so easily be entrapped by a system of teaching that was contrary to the grace of the gospel? What is the attraction of legalism when compared to the true, biblical freedom of the gospel?

Paul doesn’t hesitate to judge their hearts. It was, for them,

A. The desire to avoid persecution.

v.12

They didn't want to suffer. They didn't want to earn the disapproval of men. They were, instead, seeking that approval above all else, including the desire to win the approval of God. They were fearing men rather than fearing God.

And Paul, of course, had made that obvious judgement clear in,

Gal. 1:10 "For 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."

What a cowardly motivation that was! What an ungodly desire, to seek to gain favor with men, and to allow that desire to be motivating impulse to your teaching and preaching ministry. We don't face the persecution of physical threats and dangers that Paul might likely be referring to, but many fellow believers around the world certainly do! And we ought to pray for their courage and boldness, their faithfulness, that God's grace would be sufficient to keep them faithful. Even if the cost of that faithfulness was suffering. Even if that suffering might be unto death!

And just think about us, the average Christian in the average church in this country. We don't want anyone not to like us, we don't want anyone to disagree with us, so anything that might be hard or controversial, we avoid. We remain silent. In the desire to avoid persecution, even as minimal as it might be.

That's where legalism so often comes from, when the faithful refuse to exercise the boldness needed to confront and rebuke and contradict false teaching. There was another desire that

lurks in the heart of man, providing motivation for these Galatian legalists, too.

B. The desire for selfish boasting.

Notice how he begins,

v.12

And then,

v.13 "...they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh."

They want to boast. They want to brag about an external conformity, about how many people than can claim to have circumcised. Just as there are people today who want to boast about such external things today, like how many people are in their church.

Boasting in the flesh, boasting of outward conformity. They, themselves, desire to make a good showing in the flesh, to make themselves look good in their outward appearance. And they make themselves look all the better by having other people alongside them.

Today, it could be a style of clothing. Or hairstyle. It could be any other outward symbol of pretended spirituality, like homeschooling children, or not drinking. Maybe I think I'm more spiritual because I use the King James Version of the Bible, or because I'm a Baptist. Or a Presbyterian. Or more to the extreme, joining a cult. The reality is that there are those wishing to draw attention to themselves by compelling others to conform to their external standards. And that is where legalism comes from. From the selfishness of the human heart.

That's where legalism comes from. And that is the nature of

Paul's rebuke here. With the clear implication of their hypocrisy. Verse 13 is his rather strenuous judgment upon the hearts of these Judiazers. They were selfish. And they were proud. They were hypocrites. But they were also boasters, boasting in their outward form of religion.

As Calvin writes, "Such men pay no regard to edification, but are guided by an ambitious desire to hunt after popular applause." Surely there is nothing new under the sun!

v.13 "...they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh."

There is a great contrast here, however. The contrast between the selfish and boasting arrogance of the legalists, and,

II. TRUE GODLINESS.

True godliness. Not "a form of godliness" that denies its power, but true godliness. True holiness. A true alternative to the legalism of outward conformity to outward standards of the Christian life that exceed the requirements of his moral law and become the ground upon which we stand before God as righteous. A true alternative to legalism is, as Paul expresses it,

A. Boasting in the cross.

v.14

Now, what does that mean? To boast in the cross. Consider, v.17

I think the thought of those two verses is related. For a preacher, to boast in the cross means this,

1 Cor. 2:1 "And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except

Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."

So I don't boast in my education or in my academic degrees. I don't boast in my own eloquence or charm, nor in my own persuasiveness. In fact, Paul writes, I came to you "in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling." I came preaching Jesus Christ, so that your faith would be in him, not in me.

And so it must be today, despite the overwhelming inclination of the church today to enter into the hero worship and celebrity worship so prevalent in the world. We make Christian speakers and pastors celebrities, and we flock to them because they are celebrities. And while some of them maintain their humility in that, others are clearly led astray by the pride of their own popularity.

This is to be what you are to proud of, if I can use that word, that Jesus saved me! This is your claim to fame. This is your identity and your reputation, that Jesus saved you from your sins. No other reputation matters. No other considerations play into your mind and heart. This is who you are, neither insecure in the pursuit of outward and legalistic accomplishments, nor proud in the attainment of them.

It means, quite frankly, that you have died with Christ. And that is the most basic definition of Christian identity.

Gal. 2:20 "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

That's the answer to the questions of self-image and self-esteem. That's the solution to any identity problem you might have. That's the solution to insecurity. That you learn to boast of who you are and what you are solely with relation to the cross of Jesus Christ.

And, therefore, if you suffer in the flesh? Well, you "bear on [your] body the marks of Jesus." And as Paul explains in more detail in,

2 Cor. 4:7 "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11 For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus 'sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh."

Beloved, that's godliness! Not whether or not you are circumcised. Not whether or not you conform to some outward standard of performance to man-made traditions. This is godliness, that you carry about in your body "the death of Jesus."

And, also, in being crucified with Christ, that you also demonstrate by your life that you are,

B. Crucified to the world.

v.14

I will not boast about external symbols, Paul says, as the mark of godliness. But I will boast that I have died with Christ, that I have united to Christ in his death. And that means that "the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

That means that, by God's grace, I seek to put sin to death. I seek to crucify the flesh that is within me, I seek to mortify those desires within my own heart that wage war with my soul. As Paul writes in,

Rom. 6:3 "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. 7 For one who has died has been set free from sin. 8 Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. 10 For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. 11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. 12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. 13 Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. 14 For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace."

That's what it means to be crucified to the world. Therefore, what matters in the measure of your godliness is not circumcision, or any other legalistic regulation, but rather the absence of the works of the flesh and the evidence of the fruit of the spirit,

Gal. 5:22 "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-

control; against such things there is no law.”

And thus the very next verse,

Gal. 5:24 “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

People of God, as a concluding emphasis to the crucial teaching of this book, Paul emphasizes what really matters.
v.15

What really matters as the testimony of your faith is the,

C. Evidence of a new life.

2 Cor. 5:17 “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

Or, Col. 3:9 “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”

Put on the new man. That’s not circumcision. That’s not human tradition. That’s not external legalism. That’s the new creation, that’s the evidence that you have been renewed by God. And Paul immediately gets specific,

Col. 3:12 “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.”

Beloved, what matters in the Christian life is the evidence that your heart is changed! Not the clothes that you wore or anything in your outward appearance, but “humility, meekness, patience.” That’s godliness. “Humility, meekness, patience.” That’s the evidence of a new life. And that is the focus that keeps you from legalism and the dangers of works-righteousness. That’s the concluding application of the gospel. Not external matters of law-keeping. But the issues of the heart.

And so this most passionate of pastoral letters ends with,

III. GOSPEL GREETINGS.

Including,

A. The blessing of God.

v.16

It is a blessing repeated in,
v.18

So the peace and mercy of God are yours, when you realize that true godliness, true righteousness, is the work of God in you to transform your heart. And sadly, grievously, that is one of the great dangers of legalism in any form, that what really matters gets hidden behind surface issues. Outward conformity to tradition takes precedent, and the godliness of the heart is ignored.

But here, with Paul, the blessing of God is pronounced upon,

B. The people of God.

And the people of God are not those who are circumcised. That’s the change from the Old Covenant to the New. The people of God are not those whose ancestral genealogy traces back to

Abraham, who have been identified by the external mark of the Old Covenant. But rather, whose hearts have been circumcised. Thus Paul writes to the Romans,

Rom. 2:28 “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 29 But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.”

That’s who the people of God are, those whose hearts have been changed. And that is who Paul now labels as “Israel.” The “Israel of God.”

v.16

Therefore, Paul has completely obliterated any and all duty or obligation associated with the external ceremonies of the Old Covenant. And the promises of the Old Covenant, given to the nation of Israel, are now inherited by the church, the Israel of God.

We, therefore, are God’s people not by virtue of anything that we do. We are God’s people not by anything we have earned or merited by our own works. We are God’s people by justification. Justification by faith. Alone.

Gal. 2:16 “... we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.”

So this book is still so relevant today. The warning of this book is needed in our day as well.

Gal. 1:6 “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— 7 not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

And this is the true gospel, that Jesus Christ,

Gal. 1:4 “... gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be the glory forever and ever.”

This is the gospel I proclaim to you.

Gal. 4:4 “... when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”

Gal. 2:16 “...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.”

With that declaration of the gospel, we say good bye to this book of Galatians.