

GALATIANS 6:11-18

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Galatians 6.

Today we come to the end of Galatians. This is Paul's closing argument—his last review of the evidence—his last appeal to the jury. And it's a powerful one.

From the outset, Paul's tone in the letter has been one of deep concern and indignation, and with good reason. Like a father defending his children, Paul's love for the Galatians has led him to jealously defend them against the false teachers who had been wooing them away from the truth of the gospel. Paul's rhetoric has been fervent and intense, matching the gravity of the situation. And it's no different in this final paragraph.

Paul begins his conclusion by saying, verse 11: "See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!" As was customary, Paul likely used a secretary to take down his letters, and then at the end would take the pen himself to sign his name and authenticate the contents. He often adds personal greetings to and from others, gives instructions, and offers information about his own ministry and travel plans. This serves to sort of decelerate the letter and bring it in for a nice, soft landing.

In Galatians, however, Paul notably does not include any of this. In fact, it's the only one of Paul's letters in which he doesn't offer some form of personalized greeting or instruction at the end. He does not ease off the throttle here. And we see that intensity as he says that he is now writing with his own hand using "large letters."

The idea here isn't that Paul needed to make the font big enough so that he could read it, as some have suggested. Rather, he's writing in big, bold characters to emphasize the importance of what he is saying. It would be something like typing with caps lock on. Do you ever get an email or a text from someone who writes in all caps? Doesn't it feel like they're yelling at you? The size of the characters we use can indicate something about the tone and intensity of what is being written.

And so it is here. This is Paul writing in all caps, bold, and double underlined.

The depth of his concern for the Galatians, and the urgency of preserving the truth of the gospel, is again demonstrated here as he delivers first, a final condemnation of those who follow the false gospel, second, a final contrast with those who embrace the true gospel, and third, a final challenge to the Galatians.

We begin in verses 12 and 13, with a final condemnation of those who follow the false gospel.

I. A FINAL CONDEMNATION OF THOSE WHO FOLLOW THE FALSE GOSPEL

Here, Paul exposes the false teachers and their followers for what they really are. Regardless of what they may claim, they care nothing for the spiritual health of the Galatians nor the sacred truth of the gospel. Rather, we learn here that they are seeking only 1) to impress the world, 2) avoid persecution, and 3) boast in the flesh.

A. They Want to Impress the World (12a)

First, those who follow a false gospel are seeking to impress the world. Verse 12, the false teachers are trying to compel the Galatians be circumcised, and to become fully obedient to the Law, not because they are concerned for their souls and their salvation, but instead because they “want to impress people by means of the flesh.”

The false teachers really just want to put on a good show for those around them. They want to be approved and accepted. They want to be thought well of by the world, and especially by their own culture—law-observant Judaism.

Paul knew all about this—it’s precisely the culture that he came from and because of which he had so zealously persecuted Christians. And he had not because he was concerned for their souls, nor because he was truly concerned for God’s glory, but, as he said in Galatians 1, because he was “extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”

Impressing the world around you means advancement, ease, acclaim, and prestige. And so it was for Paul, who said that because of his zeal he had been “advancing in Judaism beyond many of his own age.” And surely this tendency was not unique to Paul, nor to the false teachers in Galatia. It’s just run-of-the mill people-pleasing—courting the favor of the world.

We spend so much time in other arenas of our lives trying to impress those around us and receive recognition—financially, professionally, academically, physically, relationally. And it’s all too natural to apply the same thing to our spiritual lives.

But what’s wrong with that, you might ask? We all want people to like us, don’t we? We’re not aiming for people to dislike us, right? I mean, if we’re going to aim to impress the world, isn’t doing so with our spiritual attainments the best way to do it? Won’t being unimpressive to the world actually work against the progress of the gospel?

Certainly, our aim is not to be disliked by people. But if our aim is to please and be faithful to God, it may and often will mean being disliked by others who do not share our convictions—and who in fact find our convictions downright offensive.

And here we would do well to remember to words of the apostle James, “Don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.”

At the same time, as we read earlier from 1 Corinthians 1, God has actually chosen to accomplish his purposes through those the world considers unimpressive so there can be no mistake about who is responsible for doing the saving.

And because of how we are innately inclined to this people-pleasing and friendship-with-the-world-seeking, it's vital that we get this clear in our minds.

People-pleasing can lead to gospel-drifting. People-pleasing exalts others' opinions over faithfulness to God. The more devoted you are to impressing others, the more disposed you will be to trimming and pruning gospel truth in order to placate them. If our goal is to impress the world, the more the world finds the sharp corners of the gospel offensive, the more we'll be willing to sand down the gospel until nothing worth keeping remains.

Part of the reason for this is that the parameters for impressing the world are constantly changing. If you are devoted to being accepted by the world, you will have to keep making more and more compromises until there is nothing left to compromise or concede.

Rather than taking our stand upon Truth and saying with Luther "My conscience is captive to the Word of God, here I stand, I can do no other," we are tempted to compromise our convictions in order to conform to the latest cultural directive, in a desperate attempt to be considered relevant. But the goal posts of what makes us relevant and acceptable to the world are always moving. If our aim is to please the world, we will inevitably surrender more and more ground just to keep up.

And in so doing, the church slowly but surely becomes indistinct from the culture and no longer serve as a prophetic and evangelistic witness.

B. They Want to Avoid Persecution (12b)

Closely related to this, those who follow a false gospel are seeking to avoid being persecuted on account of Christ. Again, verse 12: "The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ."

The motive behind their desire to impress people is not only to gain the world's favor, but also to avoid the world's ire. From the beginning, those who preached the undiluted gospel of grace have been persecuted. And the reality of such persecution leads to the same temptation to truncate and tamper with the truth of the gospel.

This is exactly what the false teachers have done. In an effort to avoid persecution by non-believing Jews, the false teachers have chosen to compromise the gospel. This kind of compromise can look like an outright denial of biblical truth—like, say, teaching that justification comes by works and not by faith alone. There are tragically no lack of examples of those who have denied the gospel in order to avoid being opposed and oppressed for the sake of Christ.

But this desire to avoid persecution can also take a softer, more subtle form. Rather than outright denying biblical truth, we merely hide and minimize certain aspects of it, fearing that if someone discovers it, it might lead to opposition. We become embarrassed about what we believe—but rather than throw it out, we just stuff it in the basement and hope nobody notices.

At my previous church there was a couple that came to a newcomer's event that we held. And when we asked what brought them to us, one of the first things they said was "When we went on your website, it was easy to find your statement of faith." Apparently, that hadn't been the case for many other churches, even evangelical churches, that they had researched.

I've been on a lot of church websites, and it's true—there are many that make finding out what they believe like a competition to see how many links you have to click and how many pages you have to be redirected to before you can actually get a hold of what truths they confess. It's almost as if they're hoping you get tired of looking and give up before you find it.

This is of course not to say that all of these churches had drifted from the gospel, but it's ought to be alarming when you can't easily find out what a church or an organization believes. When I see this, I wonder to myself—is this because they are embarrassed about their doctrine?—is this because if they were to put what they actually believe front and center, it might lead to opposition?—Are they ashamed of the gospel? Perhaps they don't outright deny any biblical truth, but they certainly don't rejoice in it.

They may say that "well, we don't focus on that because doctrine divides." To which I would say, yes: Doctrine divides between that which is true and that which is false. And that matters because, as Paul has already said in this letter, truth saves and falsehood damns.

Now, we read here that the false teachers are particularly concerned to avoid persecution for the sake of "the cross of Christ." The idea of a crucified Messiah, as we read earlier in 1 Corinthians 1, is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks. To the Jews it was highly offensive, to the Greeks it was nothing but a display of weakness. So the false teachers seem quite keen to remove the cross from the place of central importance, and to replace it with something far more palatable to Jews and respectable to Greeks—the Law.

In every age there are those who follow in their footsteps and try to make the gospel less offensive to outsiders. And this often involves obscuring the Cross, taking the substitutionary, atoning death of Christ from its place of centrality in the gospel. Perhaps it's done out of a desire to reach others (though if you're not reaching them with the cross, I'm not sure what you're trying to reach them with). Perhaps it's done in order to press the importance of Jesus's teaching or example, instead of his death. Perhaps it's done out of embarrassment of having to explain things like sacrifice and atonement to our cultured modern world.

An example of this kind of diluted Christianity, if it can be called Christianity at all, can be found in the liberal theology of the late nineteenth century. This movement emphasized as its central dogmas

the universal Fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man, but seemingly had no place for the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

But neither Jesus himself nor the apostles give us the option to decentralize or downplay the Cross. Throughout his ministry Jesus was preparing the disciples for its culmination in his death. When Jesus gave his disciples a practice by which to remember him, it symbolically pictured his death. When the evangelists wrote the Gospels, the disproportionate emphasis of their accounts was on the events leading up to and surrounding Christ's death. Paul says that tells us that the Gospel at its most fundamental is that "Christ died for our sins." When he described the essence of what he proclaimed, Paul said "We preach Christ crucified." When he reminded the Galatians how he preached to them, he said that before them Christ was publicly set forth as crucified. Put simply, in the words of John Stott, "If the cross is not central to our religion, ours is not the religion of Jesus."

Are there things that you are tempted to prune, sand, hide, or minimize about the Bible because you're embarrassed about it?—because to believe it would mean to lose the world's approval and to bring persecution? Are you willing to stand to on the unchanging truth of God's Word—and especially the word of the cross—in spite of the world's opposition?

Or are you flirting with the world's favor by chasing its constantly changing the terms of approval? If so, the words of the Lord Jesus are for you: "Repent, and hold fast to what you have received."

C. The Want to Boast in the Flesh (13b)

We also here that those who follow a false gospel are seeking to boast in what is accomplished by the flesh. Verse 13: "They want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh."

Paul's opponents, and their followers, have taken up this false gospel, not only to impress the world and to avoid persecution, but, perhaps most fundamentally, because exalts self-righteousness. They want the opportunity to boast in what they have accomplished by their works.

It is fundamental to fallen human nature that we want to earn, to share the credit, to contribute something to our standing with God. We want to come to God on terms of our own choosing. We are not naturally predisposed to come to God his way, the way of faith alone, apart from works. Everything in us fights against it, because it humbles self and exalts God. It makes nothing of our merit and everything of his grace.

To we who trust in the Lord Jesus, this is sweet, but to the flesh it is bitter. It can feel like swimming upstream, against the current. So those who follow this false gospel are laboring to keep in step with the world's standard—work, do, earn, merit—and then God will owe you and self will be exalted.

Ultimately all the false teachers have done is dress up the world's worship of self with biblical language. But underneath, it's all about impressing others to promote self, avoiding persecution to protect self, boasting in the flesh to exalt self. The god of this false gospel is not God, it is self.

II. A FINAL CONTRAST WITH THOSE WHO EMBRACE THE TRUE GOSPEL

But those who embrace the true gospel stand in glaring contrast to those who follow this false gospel on every point. Instead of seeking to impress the world, they are crucified to the world. Instead of avoiding persecution they are willing to suffer persecution for the sake of Christ. Instead of boasting in what is accomplished by the flesh, they boast only in the cross. And so center of their religion isn't self, it is Christ.

Look with me at how Paul draws out these contrasting truths.

A. They are crucified to the world (14b)

First, instead of trying to impress the world, those who embrace the true gospel have been crucified to the world. Look at verse 14: "May I never boast except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world" (14).

Recall what Paul said in Galatians 2:20: "'I have been crucified with Christ. I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.'" Those who trust Christ have been crucified with him and raised with him. Their faith binds them to Christ in such a way that his death counts for their death and his life becomes their life. And this results in more than just forgiveness of sins.

In Christ, we have died to the world, and the world has died to us. We have died to the world in the sense that the world regards us as cursed and contemptible, objects of shame and scorn, on account of the Cross. We refuse to worship what the world worships; we refuse to approve what the world approves; we refuse to love what the world loves—and so we are considered like crucified malefactors—outcasts that the world simply can't wait to see expire. Because of our allegiance to Christ, we will never impress the world.

But at the same time, we don't care. The world has been crucified to us. Having died and been made alive in Christ, we the world has ceased to have mastery over us. Its opinions and offerings no longer no longer hold us captive.

If I have received grace from God, what good is the world's favor? If I have been promised glory with Christ, what good are the world's accolades? If I am known by God, what good is the world's notoriety and popularity? If I have gained the unsearchable riches of Christ, what good is the world's fleeting pleasures? If, having been justified, I have received God's approval, what good is seeking out world's approval?

Those who embrace the true gospel are crucified to the world.

B. They are willing to suffer persecution for the sake of Christ... (17)

Second, instead of trying to avoid persecution those who embrace the true gospel are willing to suffer persecution for the sake of Christ.

Verse 17. "From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus."

Paul here is speaking of the scars he's received through being persecuted for the sake of Christ—such as when he was stoned during his ministry to the Galatian city of Lystra. These scars are the "marks of Jesus" in so far as they were suffered as a result of his proclamation of and devotion to Jesus.

Persecution has a purifying effect on Christ's Church. When it comes, those who associated with Christ's people merely out of convenience, or tradition, or force of habit, or some other perceived benefit, fall away. Persecution forces the issue—it requires you to declare your allegiance. It is much like in John 6 when Jesus begins teaching hard things—things that will get him killed—and a vast number of followers turn away. And yet when Jesus turns to the twelve apostles and asks if they too are going to leave, Peter responds: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Paul knew this too. Like the other apostles, he was willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel because he knew its truth and power. He knew that it was only in Christ that life and salvation was to be found. When you have become convinced that Christ alone is your only hope and greatest treasure—the threats of the world pale in comparison to the "surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things and consider them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ."

Friends, have we, like Paul and the other apostles, found in Christ that precious treasure that would enable us to suffer the loss of all things and yet rejoice that had gained Christ? Let us pray that Christ might become so precious to us.

Those who embrace the true gospel are willing to suffer for the sake of Christ.

C. They boast only in the cross (14a)

Third, instead of boasting in what has been accomplished by the flesh, those who embrace the true gospel boast only in what is accomplished by the cross. Verse 14: "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Have you ever been around someone who only seems to be able to talk about themselves? That's what the false gospel produces—those who only seem to boast in themselves. Our flesh would have us boast in anything but the Cross—anything that would exalt self at the expense of exalting Christ. But Paul knows that this is simply the way of the world—but the way of Christ is the polar opposite.

We read this earlier in 1 Corinthians 1. Paul said there that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God."

What the world considers foolishness, salvation by grace through faith in a crucified Messiah, Paul, and all who share the same gospel faith, know it to be the power of God, their only hope and comfort in life and death, and the only ground they have for boasting. Those who truly know God make little of themselves and much of Christ.

Salvation by the Cross is a supreme leveling tool. You see, if we're saved by our works, then one person's works will always have been a little better than another's. Someone will always have been a little more loving, a little more obedient, a little more faithful, a little more holy. Someone will always have come to God a little sooner, be a little closer to him, know a little more, be more highly favored by him. And so, it opens the floodgates for human boasting.

We can boast before God because by our works we did enough to earn our own salvation. And we can boast before others because the quality of our works renders us superior to them in some way.

But for those who are in Christ there is no room for boasting either before God or others, about what makes you different or superior to others or especially acceptable to God. Because you didn't do anything to get in, and neither did they. All have come in on the exact same terms—as trophies of divine grace.

This is part of what makes the false gospel in Galatia so offensive—it insists on making distinctions between people, a spiritual hierarchy that determines who has been rendered worthy to receive God's favor. But through the Cross, all of these distinctions between people are rendered meaningless in the matter of salvation, and so all human boasting is utterly excluded.

There is no greatest or least in the people of the new covenant. The great Apostle Paul and the thief on the cross stand in total equality before the throne of grace because they have both received mercy in the exact same way, through faith in Christ crucified. Their standing of righteousness is precisely the same—they are perfectly righteous with the righteousness of Christ. So there is no room for boasting in anything that we ourselves have done, but only in what another—Christ—has done on our behalf.

The Cross humbles human pride—pride expressed both toward God and toward one another—and instead exalts and rejoices in God's glorious grace.

Those who embrace the true gospel boast only in the Cross.

III. A FINAL CHALLENGE TO THE GALATIANS (16)

Having contrasted the way of those who follow a false gospel of justification by works of the Law with those who follow the true gospel of justification by faith in Christ, Paul now issues his final challenge to the Galatians. There is no room for sitting on the fence here—only one of these two ways leads to life, the other way leads to destruction. The Galatians have now heard Paul's argument, the case rests, and now the Galatians are challenged to come to a verdict on how they will respond. And this challenge, ironically, that is found in the form of a benediction.

Verse 16: "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God." (16)

Before we can break down how this verse functions as a challenge to the Galatians, we need to clarify whether Paul is speaking here about two different groups or just one?

In our translation the issue isn't immediately obvious, but if you go another translation like the ESV, you'll see the problem. The text here reads "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, and to the Israel of God." So, on first glance it might seem like Paul is giving this benediction to two distinct groups: 1) "those who follow this rule" and 2) what he calls the "the Israel of God."

But in Greek the word "and" can serve more than a simple conjunction—it can also be used as a marker of explanation. In that case it would be translated as something like "that is." So, "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, that is, to the Israel of God."

Some would argue for the first option, that it refers to two different groups, and that "the Israel of God" must mean "ethnic Jews" or "ethnic Jewish Christians." This interpretation is predicated on the idea that there is an inherent and permanent distinction between Jews and Gentiles, even after they come to Christ.

But the NIV has opted for the second of these options, and I think it's correct. Paul is referring to one group. I'll mention just two reasons why here:

In the immediate context, he just said in verse 15 that neither circumcision (being Jewish) or uncircumcision (not being Jewish) mean anything when it comes to our standing before God. What matters is whether people, Jewish or Gentile, are new creatures in Christ. If this is so, it would be quite odd for Paul to immediately turn to make a distinction between the two groups again.

In the context of the whole book, Paul's argument has that in Christ the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles before God have been permanently abolished. All people can be justified in the exact same way—by grace through faith in Christ alone. All those who are justified are Abraham's descendants and heirs of God's promises. Paul made this point abundantly clear in Galatians 3: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile...for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." It would be extraordinarily counterproductive for Paul to make this argument as the centerpiece of his letter, only to draw the same dividing line between Jews and Gentiles again at the end of the book.

So, we have good cause to understand Paul to be referring to just one group here—those who believe in Jesus Christ, irrespective of ethnicity.

This is like in Galatians 4 where Paul made a distinction between the "present Jerusalem" and the "Jerusalem above." This is the same idea: there is a "present people of Israel," what Paul calls in 1 Corinthians 10 "Israel according to the flesh," and an "Israel above," or what he calls here the "Israel of God."

And the determining factor of who belongs to this sin-forgiven people is not ethnicity or obedience, Paul says, but whether they “follow this rule.”

Rule here doesn’t mean a “law to obey” but a “standard used to measure.” This “rule” or “standard” here refers back verses 14–15. What determines whether someone belongs to God’s people is not circumcision, or lack of circumcision, but whether you have “rescued from the present evil age” and have entered “the life of the age to come,” being justified by grace through faith in Christ crucified. That’s the measure of being a true Israelite.

And Paul’s opponents would have been infuriated by this remark—because their whole program was built on ethnic superiority and legalistic obedience—making Gentiles become Jews and become obedient to the Law. And now Paul was telling them that not only did the Gentiles not need to become Jews nor obedient to the Law, but that they themselves weren’t truly part of God’s people.

It is those who are justified by faith, not by works, and only those, who receive mercy from and peace with God.

And it is with this challenge that Paul closes his letter. He has laid out his argument in great detail, pleading with the Galatians personally, biblically, theologically, and practically, making every effort to show them the danger posed to them by the false gospel and incalculable blessings of the true gospel.

And now, the Galatians have a choice. They can either follow the false gospel, be numbered among the hypocrites who seek the world’s favor, who avoid persecution, and who boast in the flesh, and are excluded from the people of God. Or they can hold fast to the true gospel, be numbered among those who are crucified to the world, who are willing to suffer for the sake of Christ, and who boast only in the Cross, and truly belong to God’s people.

But this challenge is also a promise—a promise to those who do indeed “follow this rule.” It is a free offer of mercy and peace with God, to obtained solely through faith in Christ. It is an offer of something that obedience to the Law could never offer or accomplish.

And this same offer stands open to you as well. Do you know that you are a sinner, deserving God’s judgment? Do you desire mercy from God? Do you long for peace with God? It is offered to you in Christ if you will turn from your allegiance to self, and instead entrust yourself to him, resting entirely on Christ alone for your salvation.

As we come to the end of Galatians, I’ll close by quoting an old Scottish hymn, based on Galatians 6:14, which is fitting conclusion to Paul’s magnificent exposition of God’s grace:

*Where should the guilty, who has lost
Jehovah’s favor by his sin,
Find a worth that he may safely trust,
A righteousness to glory in?*

*Behold the Cross! The blood divine
That there for sinful man was spilt!
Here's worth enough to glory in,
Enough to cleanse the foulest guilt.*

*When false foundations all are gone,
Each lying refuge blown to air,
The Cross remains our boast alone:
The righteousness of God there.*