

Galatians 6:11-18 Boasting in the Cross Alone

I recently read *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway. I did that at the beach. Seemed appropriate. I enjoy fishing and I knew from my son that much of the book was about said subject. The focus of Hemingway seemed to be the inner dialogue of an older man named Santiago, but his opponent, the large blue marlin, whom Santiago also affectionately called “brother,” was front and center as well. In fact, well over half the book is about Santiago and his interactions with this marlin.

I won’t spoil the end too much, but on the last page a couple of tourists were enjoying a meal on the water. As their eyes look down to the lapping waves on shore, Hemingway writes that they notice the tail of Santiago’s fish in the water. He continues,
“What’s that?” [the woman] asked the waiter.
“Shark” the waiter said.
“I didn’t know sharks had such handsome, beautifully formed tails.”
“I didn’t either,” her male companion said.”¹

Of course, they mislabeled what kind of fish tail they were seeing. The whole of Hemingway’s story, fixed on this one man and this one marlin, ends with a casual mistake, with complete ignorance of all the incredible drama leading to that moment. Masterfully, Hemingway surprises the reader with such an understated scene. They didn’t realize that what they were witnessing was not just another fish tail representing an incredible fish tale.

Here at the tail end of Galatians, Paul clearly wants to get the attention of his readers by the opposing tactic. He’s not ending with understated ambiguity but reminding them of what is front and center with clarity. This is no casual ending for effect. He identifies that there are gospel opponents, and that they have sinister motives and misplaced confidence. And, as a word of humble testimony, he clearly speaks to where the confidence of all of God’s people should reside.

I. A final word to the church about her enemies

To continue on the subject and style of writing, verse 11 is certainly germane. ¹¹ ***See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.*** We know that Paul often had his letters penned for him by an amanuensis, which was a kind of secretary or personal scribe. He is likely announcing to his readers that he has taken the pen from his helper to finish out the remainder of the letter in his own unique style. He did this to validate the authenticity of the letter. We do the same kind of thing with legal documents today, with attorneys drafting documents on our behalf but needing our signature to make them valid and binding. The ***large letters*** probably served to distinguish his handwriting from his secretary’s, and perhaps even helped to distinguish his writings from those of the Judaizers.²

¹ Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (Scribner Classics Edition), 93.

² Don’t take a lot of stock in this thought since I came up with this (plausible) possibility. The false teachers knew how to write letters as well, and maybe some would have underhandedly attributed what they wrote to Paul. One scholar (Matthew Harmon) poses that Paul is even drawing attention to his untrained penmanship as a visible expression of his refusal to boast in anything but the cross of Christ. Of course, some have taken the angle that Paul is writing in large letters because of the thorn in his flesh, or how he talks about his condition in this letter, perhaps related to his seeing ability (4:12-15).

Speaking of, he wastes no time addressing the Galatian issue with these religious leaders attempting to infiltrate the churches. He gives a final word about the churches' enemies but notice what he's doing as he addresses them. He's taking the larger issues referenced throughout Galatians and distilling them all the way down to exposing not only the root issues, but Paul gets to the heart of the Judaizers' motives.

A. *The offense of the cross*

He begins his surgical assessment in verse 12, ***Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.*** This idea of making a ***good showing in the flesh*** is, as Calvin states, “an ambitious desire to hunt after applause.”³ No doubt the applause they thirsted for was the approval of their law-brothers back in the Jerusalem. Sure to thank God with their lips, their hearts are far from the glory of God. By gaining circumcision converts their minds became puffed up with pride of the worst kind—the religious kind. There's not a stark difference from some of the ways we seek the glory of others. Have we ever known churches or denominations to make a public showing of how many baptisms they've performed? If you've been in church culture long enough, you know. On a personal level, maybe we've been careful in conveying to others our faithfulness in one discipline or another. These Judaizers revered each other's opinions and thought little of the One that mattered most.

But there was something else driving these enemies of the gospel. They knew that if they forsook their sacred rites for faith in the work of Christ at the cross, then they would draw the abusive ire of the religious elite back home in Israel. In other words, some of them counted the cost of believing Paul's message, and they landed on the side of fearing man over pleasing God.⁴ In Galatians 5:11 Paul seems to indicate that if he failed to preach the cross, then he would avoid the persecution which comes with it. He wrote, “*But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.*”

There will always be an offense towards the message we're to bear day after day. It's unavoidable. If you're here and you've not been a believer very long, store this away—you may lose the respect you worked so hard to earn in that office; you may lose that friend you've walked through life's fires with; you might find yourself bewildered by the resistance of others towards the things which you now treasure. But he who loses his life will find it.

Being a semi-recent part-time employee at Kroger for a little over a year, I learned a term for losing our product due to a number of factors. It's called *shrink*, or *shrinkage*. There's always a certain amount of shrinkage due to theft. Of course, there's damage due to human accidents and neglect; there's ruin due to power outages or improper staging. In the Christian life, we shouldn't be surprised to experience shrinkage created by those who are opposed to our LORD and His message of repentance and cross-bearing. Those who can't stomach the demands of the gospel nor the beautiful realities that it creates will sometimes seek to harm those who live under both. These kinds of reactions have maintained and exist with varying intensities throughout the world today. When we live outside of faith, we want to hoard glory for ourselves. But living under the shadow

³ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: Vol. XXI*, 181.

⁴ Galatians 1:10

of the cross produces something altogether different. It's where Paul has led us the whole letter, and where he is leading us in this text.

A. *The pride produced by works*

Verse 13, ***For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh.*** Notice how Paul keeps distinguishing the Judaizers from the Galatian believers with the pronouns ***they*** and ***you***. We've said it all through this series, but Paul is hopeful that these Galatians have not sold out quite yet. He's persuaded and implored them with warning language. In short, he's loved them. And love compels correction when the only truth that saves is on the cusp of compromise.

Again, a main artery of the Judaizers' demands came down to the physical act of being ***circumcised***. To echo John Stott, it's "palpably ridiculous" that such an outward, physical act could serve as an indispensable condition of the salvation of our souls!⁵

They believe this so strongly, that these antagonists of the faith are seeking to do precisely what Jesus expressed to the religious leaders of His day, "*Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. [13] But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. [15] Woe to you...For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.*" Their own outward conformity to the Law was not enough. These traveling charlatans of righteousness were aiming to accrue Galatian trophies to "commend to God," they might say. And nothing would please them more than reporting back to Jerusalem that they'd been successful in their persuasions.

Paul gives the Galatians another reason to turn away from the Judaizers. ***For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law...*** While requiring obedience to the Mosaic system, like everyone else in the world who attempts to keep the law at every point, they failed. In fact, those who rely on the works of the law, we saw back in chapter 3, are under its curse. It can't be done. It's the glaring detail of their whole lives of which these Judaizers were blinded. Nonetheless, they were so proud of themselves and of those that they won over along the way. Paul knew that the Galatians were a means to an end for these insurgents. They exalted themselves and sought to do more of the same if others would but listen to their teaching which was that the gospel needed a helping hand to save.

II. A final word to the church about her Lord

He points them to a better way, a better foundation, something actually worth boasting about. Verse 14, ***But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.***

A. *Boasting in the cross alone*

⁵ John Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Galatians*, 177.

This is worlds apart from the Judaizers actions and motives. The justifying work of Christ through His death apart from human works is the major theme of Galatians. Now Paul is wrapping the letter up by reminding them of the centrality of Christ's achievements at Calvary, not man's. But this is also a self-directed plea by Paul which is functioning as a marker in the book, a highlight to which all believers would do well to hang their everything on. In the strongest possible terms Paul is saying, the exact word order, "***But me, may it never be...***"!⁶ This is what the Judaizers are doing—seeking glory in their slick displays of open-aired righteousness and public personas, and if others join them in showiness, then their pride would only be increased, ballooning their self-importance even more.

We all place our confidence and venerations somewhere. It's a skill set that comes with being born. It stirs unceasingly in the human heart. It's honed by interacting and watching each other. Boastful pride led God to rid heaven of Satan. Our first parents expressed that very thing, which required a just response of a holy God. And we come from a long line of those who have the itch to boast about self.

It's not difficult to overlay what was boasted over in Paul's day with our day, or with any day throughout the history of the world. The Roman games, called *Ludi*, was a context where the strong was expected to boast about his prowess. Military feats, oratorical abilities, political clout and power, riches, and social status were points of boasting then and now. Paul says here, distinct from all those timeless points of boasting, boast in what is wholly worthy of it—***the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ***.

It was an unthinkable thing to do for any commoner who knew someone executed on a Roman cross. Without sounding unbelievably crude and insensitive, and giving your children nightmares, it's hard to come up with a modern equivalent. The word *crux* was taboo to use in polite Roman society.⁷ To bank all one's hopes on someone hanging in abject shame?

Why then would Paul express a cross as his boast? Because of the One who hung on it. Because the death of Jesus was like no other. His death absorbed the wrath of God in our place. His death pleased God the Father. His death was the gateway for His resurrection and ours. His death reveals the incomparable love of God for sinners. His death cancelled the legal demands of the law against us. His death was the ransom payment for us. He forgave our sins through His death by taking on the punishment that those billions of sins required. His death is forever the basis for our legal, forensic justification. His death was a release from our eternal condemnation. His death obtained for us every spiritual gift in the heavenlies. His death will eventually deliver us from the present evil age. His death opened up access to fellowship with God. Through His death Jesus became the sympathetic great high priest we needed most. His death freed us from sin's slavery, enables our self-sacrificial living, and frees us from the fear of death. His death disarms the spiritual rulers and authorities we can't see, brings peace to our hearts concerning God and each other, and it shows that the worst evils are still meant by God for good. Because of all this and more, the death of God's Son is the grounds for all of our boasting! We can see why Paul, from which we get most of those things I just mentioned, would then write that through Jesus ***the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world***. This is what we reckon, where we land in

⁶ Timothy George, *NAC: Galatians*, 435.

⁷ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 271.

our deepest resolves. The world's standards, loves, passions, pursuits, goals, schemes, directives, all feeding into the remaining sin in us, we're to learn what it means that these things are now dead to us and us to them.

So please, Judaizers, spare us the pitch. Put away all the ritual tools needed to do the indelicate job to which you keep referring because that's all been put to rest by the death of death through the Author of life. Philippians 3:3, "*For we are the [true] circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh...*"!

B. *A new creation*

Of course, Paul agrees. He wrote verse 15 here in Galatians about 15 years prior to Philippians. Verse 15, ***For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.*** Not anything. Anatomy dealing with procreation—requiring that kind of transformation to please God was truly sinister! If you accept that, then Christ will be of no advantage to you.⁸ If you embrace circumcision, then you are obligated to keep the law at every point.⁹ What's the point? The work of Christ making us a ***new creation***—that's the doctrinal ticket that takes us to the place of glorious worship. There is a renewed understanding of what God has done under the reign of grace. Colossians 2:11–12, "...*You were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, [12] having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.*"

Brothers and sisters, you are in Christ, a new creation.¹⁰ If you're here and have never trusted in what Christ did at the cross, if you're hearing this gospel of God's grace which states that Jesus did everything needed for you to be justified in God's sight for all eternity, then listen. Anyone who ever tells you "Do this and then you will live," is at odds with Paul and his Lord, the Jesus of scripture. It's not "whoever does this for Christ will not perish," but it's "whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life."

III. The final word of blessing to the church

He says in verse 16, ***And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.*** The rule by which the church must walk is banking all her trust in Christ alone and His work at the cross, which produces new creatures in Christ. If we anchor our lives and if South Woods anchors itself in the waters of boasting in Christ alone, we will experience (and indeed have experienced) the common Jewish blessing of peace and mercy. Considering the way Paul speaks of the church being Abraham's true offspring, the ***Israel of God*** here seems to refer to those who walk by this rule, that is, who walk with confidence in the death of Jesus in their place. Otherwise, how would anyone, including ethnic Israel, ever know true peace and mercy without the gospel?

⁸ Galatians 5:2

⁹ Galatians 5:3

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:17

Paul returns one last time to himself. ¹⁷ ***From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.*** This brother was tired of these meddling Judaizers. The connection between his personal ***trouble*** and his ***brand-marks for Jesus*** seem to be a matter of his authentication as one who has been given authority. By the time Paul wrote Galatians, he had been blinded on the road of Damascus in Acts 9 and stoned in Acts 14. At the least, these events contributed to those ***brand-marks***. But contrary to the hidden ***brand-marks*** of the Judaizers, which were signs of works righteousness, the scars of Paul were marks of faithfulness to Christ who loved him to death.

Conclusion

Paul is not casually humming his way through the last words of Galatians. There are some dangerous characters in the seas of the world. They are proud, strong, boisterous, sly, and deceptive. They possess sinister motives and confidence in themselves. They are vying for attention and an audience. But true faith and accurate knowledge of God will always issue into understanding that God deserves all the glory for every rescue from sin and death.¹¹ We will be boasting in the cross into endless ages. It will be common speak in the new heavens and new earth. But let it be that we can't help but starting as long as we have breath.

¹¹ Isaiah 42:8, "*I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other; nor my praise to carved idols.*"