

The Crucified Apostle

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles now for our reading, and we're in Paul's letter to the Galatians. In the last chapter, chapter 6, if you have one of our church hardback Bibles, that's I think page 975.

And we're in the last of these studies. Rupert has been leading us through this letter of Paul, which is all about the true gospel, which delivers us from this present evil age and into what we've just been singing about, the new creation through Jesus Christ. And we're going to read Paul's last paragraph, beginning at chapter 6, verse 11, and down to the end, verse 18.

See with what large letters I'm writing to you with my own hand. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.

But far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.

[1 : 33] For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything but a new creation. Yet as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, upon the Israel of God.

From now on 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. Well, let's bow our heads, shall we? King of kings, God of heaven, we pray, Lord, that as we listen to your word together now, that falling before your throne would be real and meaningful and wholehearted.

Help us, Lord, to surrender our hearts and minds and wills to your loving rule. For we ask it in Jesus' precious name.

Amen. Do please have Galatians chapter 6 open in front of you, page 975. Well, it's exam time.

[3 : 01] I'm sure some of you remember how that felt. These aren't your school leaving exams or your university finals. No. This is the last exam you'll ever sit.

What is your only comfort, both in life and in death?

Well, how will you answer? All around the room, of course, people are scribbling away frantically, filling up the page with words. And they're the Bible experts, your Galatian teachers.

Well, I was a terrible sinner, one of them writes. But then I came to know the Lord. He forgave me. And slowly but surely, I got my life in order. I made some difficult choices.

I gave up some unhealthy habits. I made it a principle to stick with the mature Christians, the ones who'd helped me towards holiness. And eventually, I made that decisive step to say, there's no going back.

[4 : 09] For me, that meant circumcision. And I really have found that although, of course, none of us are perfect, my religion has been a great help to me in growing closer to the Lord.

Well, then across the room, you see one other teacher. It's the old apostle Paul. He picks up his pen and in large capital letters writes just four words.

The cross of Christ. In life, his cross has been my only pattern.

In death, his cross has been my only pride. He puts a full stop, stands up, and leaves the exam hall. The room's hushed, of course, isn't it? No sound but that tick, tick of the big clock on the wall. Time trickling away. And now you have to answer the question.

[5 : 13] That's where Paul leaves the Galatians at the end of his letter. He's crystallizing the differences that he's been exposing right the way through. The choice between two different ministries and two very different answers to the Christian life.

And now it's time for his readers to face a decision. So as he wraps up, Paul gets very explicit. Look at them, he says.

And then look at me and ask, which of those teachers is really embracing the cross of the Lord Jesus? Who's really walking in step with his gospel, his spirit?

You want an escape, you Galatians, from this present evil age? That's where the book began, chapter 1, verse 4. You want an answer to that discouraging grip that this world still has on your hearts?

Well, look closely, says Paul, because only one of these ministries is truly living for the world to come. And the other, truth be told, is still seduced by the ways of this age.

[6 : 21] One of these ministries looks the part, but at its heart, it's a ministry of the flesh, a ministry of self-love and self-promotion.

Two ministries then. And at their heart, every ministry is one of these two, yours, mine, the ministries of those people we read and watch and listen to.

So, boy, is this passage a challenge to me as I head on to take responsibility for another church. But it is not just a little narrow passage for pastors.

No, this is about how all of you care for each other back here, minister to each other, how you volunteer and love and serve. At its heart, every one of our lives is either a ministry of self-love or a ministry of self-giving.

Either I embrace myself and so use Christ's people, or I embrace Christ's cross and so give myself for his people.

[7 : 29] Paul's going to lay it out for us very simply in big, bold, capital letters, verse 11. First, he'll show his readers the truth about their legalistic teachers, and then he'll subject himself to the same spotlight and he'll expose two things each time, a motive and a mark.

What really motivates each of those ministries and what's the true mark of its teachers? So firstly then, in verses 11 to 13, we've got a ministry of self-love, a ministry of self-love.

And I think to understand how spectacularly offensive verse 12 is, we need to remember just who Paul is talking about. This is a church full of young, insecure converts who looked up in awe at the people Paul's accusing here.

He's talking about the spiritual-looking ones, the devout, godly Jewish Christians, the ones who seem to be doing real battle with sin, who sound so much more intimate with Jesus.

And yet, what does Paul call them in verse 12? Flesh people. People driven by the very thing they're trying so hard to tame.

[8 : 43] Because really, their great and abiding motive is to look out for number one, to make a good showing in the flesh, to impress people.

It looks like they care deeply about holiness, about God's law, about circumcision and restraining the sinful nature. But the truth is, says Paul, it's you they're interested in.

And that sinful nature is the very thing that's driving them. Religion is really about how we look and what we can get here and now in this age.

And it turns out that that is the real divide in this letter. We've seen all the way through that it's not really a letter about two ways of salvation. It's about a choice between two ages.

The real question, right from chapter one, verse one, is which age do you belong to? Is your ultimate hope of godliness something now and fleshly and man-made?

[9 : 44] or is it then and spirit-wrought and eternal? Is your answer to sin and discouragement a this-world answer, some human technique?

Or is it simply to keep on trusting Jesus with your eyes on his promise? Well, now we see what drives the Galatian troublemakers. It's boasting in their flesh, verse 13, boasting in the now stuff.

They want a church that looks good on the outside, don't they? Lots of converts and lots of baptisms, even better, lots of circumcisions. Won't the Jewish neighbors be impressed?

Lots of bums on seats at the new church plants, lots of signatures on all the right petitions, lots of people in awe at their eloquent Bible teachers and their reputation for being real, and lots of name-dropping and self-promotion on all the blogs and at all the right conferences.

And ultimately, of course, they're driven by the one thing our flesh craves most of all, and that is to protect itself. Isn't that what verse 12 says?

[10 : 52] They want to force you to be circumcised and make a good religious showing, and the only reason they do it is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. So do you see what really

matters to these influential Christian teachers?

Their real hope is in their performance now. They brag in their success now, and their ultimate fear is persecution now.

At the end of the day, this age is where the money is. And if deep down, you and I believe the same thing, I wonder how far our patience would stretch when walking in step with the gospel begins to cost.

There are certain things I just have a very low tolerance threshold for. One is any form of social awkwardness. When I was young, I used to see how close I could get my chair to someone else's table any time we ate out in a restaurant just in the hope that whatever the waiters thought about my awkward family, they might not realize I belonged to them.

I had a very low threshold for embarrassments and awkwardness. Another is pain, especially any pain involving my eyes, which is quite unfortunate because I seem very good at injuring my eyes.

[12:12] I can barely change a nappy these days without some form of ocular assault. In fact, I've ended up in the eye hospital for nothing more than making a cup of coffee the wrong way. And I think I've told you this before, until Kathy Morrison found out, our church optometrist, I used to keep a little bottle of local anesthetic drops from the vet's practice at home in a drawer.

The problem was that those drops, wonderful though they are, stop your eye from healing altogether. I wonder though if you can imagine how tempting it is to use one little drop when you've had a poke in the cornea from a toddler.

You know that all it takes is one little drop and all the pain goes away. I think we all have things, don't we, that we struggle to bear with patiently.

We all have a low tolerance threshold for some things. how far would that patience stretch if right now was the moment that mattered? Just add a little drop of Jewish religion and the respectable neighbors will stop complaining about the church that you pastor.

Just sit the new convert at a different table until they learn to fit in and you mitigate all that social awkwardness. Just try to impress people a little by something that you have and they don't and you'll start to recover your reputation.

[13:39] You'll make a name for yourself in ministry. All you need is a little drop of something else to bring people in. Be open to our kind of worship you'll tell them. Experience our kind of teaching.

Just join in with us and then I think you'll really begin to grow. then you'll start winning at the Christian life. How long would you resist those temptations do you think if performance and success and security in this age was the thing that counted?

But there's always a giveaway isn't there? The minute someone's answer to discouragement with the Christian life and that struggle for holiness shifts away from keep trusting Jesus to join our group and have what we've got well then you're dealing with Galatian type teaching.

That's when you know that really the prize is in this age and the more that solution divides the church and points you to a human being with all the answers the more Galatian it looks.

So friends let's at least try to be honest with ourselves about whose opinion matters most to us. That can be a painful question to ask can't it?

[14:58] Especially when you find yourself being slighted for being a believer or when you're made to feel inadequate by other Christians. The truth is that often it is not really God whose opinion really matters.

That's I think what Paul's exposing there in verse 13. He's questioned their motives and once again he backs that up by showing us their attitude to God's law.

These people seem to love God. It seems to be his opinion that counts but really their love for the law has nothing at all to do with their love for God. It is not really him and his future age that matters which is why I think the law is something they aren't really keeping.

I don't think he's saying there that the law is too hard for them to keep. No the point in context is that they don't even know what it means to keep God's law. They have totally misunderstood what it's all about haven't they?

They've missed what Paul's been arguing all along these last few chapters that God's law is all about love. It's about the heart. You know the Christians who love God don't you?

[16:07] Because you see them here Sunday by Sunday looking after you ministering to you. You can see when it's God's opinion that matters to someone. They grasp his law they love.

But a ministry of self-love treats God's law like something to parade in front of others. It's a technique to set you apart as a spiritual type of person.

And that I think brings us to the real issue in Galatia. It wasn't circumcision. It wasn't really a theological debate. No the real problem in this church was sinful people.

The problem in every church Jewish law was just the particular tool that some of them used to impress and manipulate other Christians. Back in chapter 4 remember Paul gave the game away about their real motive.

They make much of you these teachers he said chapter 4 verse 17 they make much of you but for no good purpose they want to shut you out in order that you make much of them.

[17:19] See do you see what he's showing us about these teachers? He's painting the opposite portrait really to last week. This is how a beautiful living church is ruined when we walk in step with the flesh and not the spirit.

That's what religion is all about at its heart. It isn't really about loving God or even trying to impress him. No, religion is about me loving me and other people only matter as a way of getting what we want for ourself.

We want to look better. We want to earn their praise or at the very least we don't want other Christians to think badly of us. That's enough to make me pretend and put on a show and those of us who stand up front and teach the Bible or hold sway in a church we are just as vulnerable to those temptations as anyone else.

We're marked by all the same insecurities and what better way to feed a man's insecurities than by giving him a platform to gather up lots of his own little disciples.

That's what these teachers wanted, isn't it? The religious man feels better about himself because of all the vulnerable struggling Christians in his care. So up in verse 4 they were boasting by looking down on each other because how soothing it feels to have all sorts of people needing you whose lives seem to be more of a mess than your own.

[18:56] And then when they start to show all his own external superficial signs of spiritual growth that religious man can boast all over again in his impressive discipleship.

That was the ugly truth, I think, about these Galatian legalists. Theirs was a ministry driven by their own insecurity and guilt and selfish needs.

So if that's the motive, what's the mark? How does Paul want this church to recognize people whose influence isn't helpful? people? Well, the big tale is exactly what they're boasting in, isn't it? It's the external signs that they use to validate their ministry. These ones, of course, would have pointed to a literal superficial mark in the flesh, to their circumcision rates.

But it could just as easily be something else. They could point you to the numbers they've collected up into their home group. They could point you to all the busy church programs they're involved with, their student group, or their Christianity Explored group, or their thriving Farsi group.

[20:03] They could point you to all the tracts they've given out, or the gospel conversations they'd had. All good things. But if that becomes all a person's drawing attention to, well, it may well be that it's themselves they're really embracing, and not the Lord Jesus.

But what a contrast to Paul. Far be it from me, he says, to boast in the flesh, in the now stuff, or in anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus, because none of that, verse 15, counts for a jot.

Only his new creation at work in us now. And that's what real freedom has looked like, I think, in this letter. To be free is to have died with Christ, to have crucified your pride, and your boasting, and your sense that there's anything special about you that earns God's goodness.

It's to be free from all that crushing need for respect, and approval, and praise here in this age. And that leads to a very different sort of ministry, one that embraces Jesus instead of yourself, and his ways of doing things.

And that's verses 14 to 18, a ministry of self-giving. Either I embrace myself, and so use Christ's church, or I embrace Christ's cross, and so give myself for his church.

[21:38] And isn't it striking that the one thing the legalists are most ashamed of is the one thing Paul will glory in, the cross of his savior.

So here's Paul's great motivation, and wouldn't it be absolutely wonderful to say the same? His motivation is to follow Jesus and exalt only Jesus.

In death, the cross will be Paul's only pride, his only boast before a holy judge, and in life, that cross will be his only pattern, one of self-giving and sacrifice.

And just think how that showed in the way Paul ministered, how he gave himself. These other guys would do whatever it took to avoid discomfort, to avoid the scandal of the gospel to people's traditions.

And yet Paul paid an astonishing price, didn't he? So that these Galatians could hear the truth, persecuted at every step, because chapter 5, verse 11, he refused to compromise the message.

[22 : 51] Now why would a man do all of that for them? Well, it's because his hope lay in something far deeper than comfort here in this age.

It was new creation he cared about, verse 15, and that new age can only begin here and now when Jesus' spirit does something inside a heart, just as he had in Paul's heart.

heart. And so that is Paul's one and only boast, that he is nothing but what Christ has made him.

Notice though, verse 14, that the cross has done something very real in Paul's life.

Through the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, this world has been crucified to me and I to the world. Right through this letter, Paul's been laying out a real answer to this evil age, to the power of this world over our souls and over our hearts.

And at last we have it. It's not to try harder, to adopt new rules. No, that doesn't go nearly far enough, does it? The answer to this evil age is to die.

[24 : 05] And Paul is a dead man walking. And if you're a Christian, then your life is so wrapped up in the cross of your savior that when Jesus died, you also died with him.

Which is why Paul can say that he is finally free. Not from the struggle, but he's already died the death that this world is facing. The age to come has been born already through the spirit in his heart, which means that he's free from the fate of this age.

And he's free from its grip on his values. All the world with its boasting and its pride is dead to him. He's free to think less of himself and more of Christ.

And if you belong to Jesus, then so are you. Because what counts to you is verse 15. It's the new world opened up for us by his cross.

That is why Jesus people, the Israel of God, they're free to walk by his rule. Not self-love, which we show in all those superficial outward signs, but love for the Lord who gave himself to seek and to save the lost.

[25 : 24] The cross says that my brothers and sisters are more valuable than my own status and sense of importance. The cross says that the good of the church is more important than the reputation I get for service or for godliness.

The cross says that this world just does not have as much to offer me as it pretends. So although people might sneer and look down on me, their thinking well of me is less important than my honesty about Jesus because their good opinion of me will only last as long as this age does. and I belong to the next. At their heart a religious person is someone trying to hang on by the claws to their own status, their own pride, someone who's still grieving for this life with all it's pretending, who won't put all of their eggs in Jesus' basket.

But there's a death we have to embrace in coming to Christ, isn't there? And in the end the sad truth is that it was easier for these Galatian teachers to play the part and keep their pride than to embrace Jesus' cross.

For Paul though, that cross was the one thing that drove and motivated him above all else. So what's the mark of a Christian like Paul?

[27 : 02] How do you spot him? Well, I think verse 17 is just the most extraordinary end to a letter I've ever seen.

Of all the parting words you could possibly imagine, Paul chooses this. Here's the final proof he says of my authority. From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

Those beatings and lashings that Paul took so that others could find forgiveness. That's what he's talking about. Now it's the spirit of Christ which does that to a person, isn't it?

The spirit of Christ drags us into conflict with our own selfishness, our own pride. That's what we've seen. So those scars cried out louder than words that Paul belonged to a crucified savior.

He was a man walking in step with that spirit. A preacher once put a picture in my mind I've never been able to forget. He painted a picture of what Paul's back must have looked like.

[28 : 15] A mess of thick white tangled cords of scar tissue like a bowl of spaghetti. Can you picture it? So please don't miss what a shocking thing Paul's saying here.

Paul chooses his last words very carefully. If you want a mark in the flesh he's saying a sign that I'm a proper circumcised Israelite I'll give you a mark.

But it's not the scar you're looking for. It's nothing as crass and superficial as that. You don't see I'm for real by pulling down my trousers.

No. You pull a shirt off my back. That's why grace left its mark on me. It's a mark which dead self-serving religion could never give you isn't it?

But the gospel of a self-giving crucified Christ well that really could change a man. So it's exam time.

[29 : 21] the last exam you'll ever sit and the clock is ticking. What is your only comfort both in life and in death?

Paul writes his answer in big clear letters embrace the cross. It is the only pattern to follow in this life and it's the only pride to boast of in death.

he places a full stop and leaves them to decide. Let's pray. Father God we thank you so much for the cross of your son where our new creation was forged in love and purchased through pain and sacrifice and self-giving.

so help us Lord to gladly think less of ourselves that we might gain Christ and be found in him and answer with Paul that we have no boast but that another man died for us and we now live for him for we ask it through the merit of Jesus Christ our gracious Lord.

Amen. Amen.