

Sacrifice

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[0 : 00] For now, though, we're going to turn to God's Word and to the last of our little series at the end of Galatians. Galatians chapter 6 on page 975 in our Blue Bibles.

And let me begin by reading a few verses from where Paul began this whole section back in chapter 5, just to catch us up. Chapter 5, verse 6, Paul writes to these dear Galatian brothers, For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

Verse 11, If I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case, the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves, for you were called to freedom, brothers.

Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. And on to our passage for today, chapter 6, verse 11 onwards. 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.

[1 : 41] 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.

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And that's for all who walk by this rule.

Peace and mercy be upon them and 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 ask for our Father's help before we come to look at these final words.

Our loving Heavenly Father, who gave your only begotten Son, that we who believe in him should not perish, but receive everlasting life.

[2 : 54] We ask that in your grace you would teach us more this afternoon of what it means to belong to a crucified Savior. Give us soft hearts and help us to walk by your rule of grace and of love and of trust in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In his name we pray. Amen. It's exam time. I wonder if you can remember how that felt. These aren't your school leaving exams or your university finals.

No, this is the last exam that you'll ever sit. Nervously, you turn over the paper and there's just one question facing you.

What is your only comfort, both in life and in death? Well, how will you answer? All around the room, people are scribbling frantically, filling up the page with words.

They're the Bible experts. You're Galatian teachers. Well, I was a terrible sinner. One of them, right? But then I came to know the Lord. He forgave me.

[4 : 11] 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. I had myself circumcised. And I really have found that although none of us are perfect, of course, my religion's been a real comfort to me.

There's one answer. Across the room, you see one other teacher. It's the old apostle, Paul. He picks up his pen.

And in large capital letters, he writes four words. The cross of Christ. In life, the cross is my only pattern.

And in death, the cross is my only pride. He puts a full stop. He stands up and leaves the exam hall.

[5 : 24] Now, the room's hushed, isn't it? No sound but the tick, tick of the big clock on the wall. Time trickling away. And now you have to answer the question.

So what will you write? That's where this letter leaves the Galatians. They're faced for one last time with the choice between two teachers and two answers to the Christian life.

And now it's time for them to make up their minds. So as he wraps up this letter, Paul gets very explicit. Look at them, he says. And then look at me.

And ask which teacher is really showing me that way of freedom? You want an escape, don't you, from this present evil age, chapter one, from the grip of your sinful nature.

So which teacher seems to know the way out? How do you spot the one embracing this age and the one living for the next? Now, Paul's been giving us several marks of true freedom over the past few chapters.

[6 : 32] Marks of someone who's found forgiveness in Christ and release from all that religion and guilt. And now comes the decider. The final pillar of true freedom, says Paul, is the life of the cross.

It's sacrifice. 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 the crushing need for respect and approval and praise. It's the freedom to sacrifice yourself.

To take up his cross. To love and put others before yourself. So which teacher embraces the cross?

And which teachers, if truth be told, are still embracing the flesh? Which way is freedom? And which way is really just the old slavery to the ways of this world and this age?

[7 : 43] Paul's going to lay that out for us very simply in big, bold 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 gospel?

And what's the true mark of its teachers? So firstly, we get one last look at the way of slavery. Verses 11 to 13 tell us that enslavement means embracing yourself.

The great motive of Galatia's Holy Joe religious teachers is really to look out for number one. Isn't verse 12 spectacularly offensive to a religious person?

Who are these super devout, godly Galatians? Well, they're the ones who just want to make a good showing in the flesh. That's the truth. They say they care deeply about holiness, about God's law, about restraining the sinful nature.

[8 : 55] But the truth is, it's the sinful nature which is driving them. Religion is really about how we look and what we can get now in this age.

That's been the ultimate divide at the heart of this letter, hasn't it? Which age do you belong to? Is your hope and your confidence all based in the stuff of this age?

Or is it in the promise of the world to come? Well, now we see what drives these troublemakers. It's boasting in the Galatians' flesh, verse 13.

In the now stuff. They want a church which looks good from the outside. Lots of converts. Lots of baptisms. Even better, lots of circumcisions.

Wouldn't the Jewish neighbors be impressed? Lots of bums on seats. At the lunchtime service or the new church plant. Lots of signatures on all the right petitions.

[9 : 54] Lots of tickets being sold to the big conferences. And lots of name dropping. And self-promotion on the blogs and the newsletters. And the back of the books.

And ultimately, of course, they're being driven by the one thing our flesh wants above all. To protect itself. Isn't that what verse 12 says?

They want to force you to be circumcised and make a good religious showing. Only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

Do you see what really matters to these influential Christians? Their hope is all in their performance now. They brag in their success now.

And their ultimate fear is persecution now. A few years ago, one of my daughters completely crippled me with one carefully aimed swipe at my eye.

[10 : 56] And let me tell you, for a few days, it was exquisitely painful. But I happened to have a little bottle of anesthetic eye drops. The problem is you shouldn't really use them.

And you've got damage to the front of your eye. Because all it does is soften the cornea even more and stop it healing. But can you imagine how hard it was to resist? All it took was one little drop.

And all the pain would vanish. Well, that's what it must have felt like to hold on to the cross with all its implications for the church in a religious world.

All you had to do to make all the pain vanish was add a little drop, just one, of something else. Add just a drop of Jewish tradition and you don't ruffle any feathers.

Just sit the new converts at a different table until they fit in. That's what these teachers just couldn't resist. They needed a good, circumcised church that didn't look too different from the Jewish world outside.

[12 : 04] So the truth is that often it's not really God's opinion that matters most to us. These people didn't really give a stuff about his law, verse 13.

They treated it all like a load of external commands, badges that you could show off and parade in front of others. So the real issue in Galatia wasn't circumcision.

The real issue was sinful people. Jewish law was just the tool that some of them used to control and manipulate the church.

Back in chapter 4, Paul made one very revealing comment about their real motive. They make much of you, these teachers, he said, 417.

But for no good purpose, they want to shut you out that you make much of them. If someone really cares about what God wants, well, hasn't Paul said right through these chapters that you'll see it in the way they care for his people?

[13 : 13] Isn't that what the law asks for? Love. That was what the whole thing's about. But when the flesh is controlling the church, other people only matter as a way to get what we want for ourselves.

When we veer into legalism, we don't do it because we love God. We do it because we love ourselves. We want to look better.

We want praise. Or at the very least, we don't want people to think too badly of us. So how impressive these leaders must have looked.

But when Paul lifts a lid on their religion, what we see is all those works of the flesh let loose on God's church.

And religion is just the costume we use, isn't it? To disguise our own proud, selfish need to look good. So let me give you a little insight into your pastors and the influential Christians you look up to.

[14 : 22] They are as human as you are. And we're marked by all the same insecurities. And what better way to feed a man's insecurities than by letting him 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 he can look down on the vulnerable, struggling Christians in his care.

That was the boasting we saw last week, back in verse 4. How soothing it feels to have all sorts of people needing you whose lives just seem to be in a bit more of a mess than your own.

And then when the people who look up to him start showing all those external, superficial, visible signs of growth, the religious man can boast all over again in his impressive discipleship.

That was the ugly truth about these Galatian legalists. Ultimately, slavery in this letter means slavery to yourself, your sinful nature, your own insecurity and guilt and selfish needs.

[15 : 40] Well, if that's the motive, then what's the mark? How does Paul want this church to recognize the people whose influence isn't helpful? Well, the big tell is exactly what they're boasting in, isn't it?

It's the external signs that they use to validate their ministry. These ones could have pointed to a real, literal, superficial mark in the flesh. They'd have pointed you to their circumcision.

But it could just as well be something else. They could point you to all 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 catering group or their boys' brigade group.

They could point you to all the tracts they've given out or the gospel conversations they've had. There's nothing wrong with any of those things, is there?

But if that's what a person's drawing attention to, well, it may be that it's themselves they're really embracing and not the Lord Jesus.

[16 : 51] And what a contrast to Paul. Far be it for me, he says, to boast in the flesh, in the now stuff, or in anything but the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because none of that counts for anything, verse 15. Only his new creation at work in us now. And that's freedom.

So here comes our second point from verses 14 to 18. Enslavement meant embracing yourself. But secondly, freedom means embracing the cross.

Isn't it striking that the one thing the legalists are most ashamed of is the one thing that Paul will glory in. And so that's Paul's great motivation, to follow Jesus and to exalt only Jesus.

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

[18 : 09] Just think how that showed in the way Paul ministered. The other guys would do whatever it took to avoid discomfort, to avoid the scandal of the gospel, the scandal that it was to people's traditions.

But remember what Paul said back in 511. If I still preach that message, circumcision, then why am I being persecuted so much? In that case, the offense of the cross has been removed.

Paul was never ashamed of what the gospel meant for the church, was he? Because his hope was in something far deeper than comfort in this age.

It was the new creation he cared about, verse 15, the new age which Christ has begun right now in the heart of every Christian, through his spirit.

Not some external show of righteousness, but an internal change which only a crucified Lord could bring about. And so that is Paul's one boast, that he is nothing but what Christ has made him.

[19 : 18] Notice, though, verse 14, that the cross has done something very real in Paul's life. Through the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

For two long chapters, we've been looking, haven't we, for an answer to this evil age, to the power of this world over our souls, and over our hearts. And at last, here we have it.

It's not to try harder, or to adopt new rules and customs. No, that doesn't go nearly far enough. The answer is to die. And Paul is a dead man, walking.

If you're a Christian, then your life is so wrapped up in the cross of our Saviour, that when Jesus died, you died.

And so Paul can say that he is finally free. Not free from the struggle, but he's already died the death that this world, this age, is facing.

[20 : 27] He's free from its fate, and he's free from its grip on his heart. All the world, with its values and its pride, is dead to him now.

He's free to think less of himself and more of Christ. He's free to be controlled by Christ and not simply to walk in slavery to his own sinful flesh.

And if you belong to this Jesus, well, then you are too. The life of the cross, verse 5, of the new world, at work in you now, is the only thing that counts.

That's the rule which all true Israelites follow, verse 16. All true people of God's Messiah. not self-love, which we show in all those superficial, outward signs, but love for the Lord who gave himself to seek and save the lost.

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

[21 : 56] The cross says that this world 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.

And that small sacrifice, you see, is really one eternal freedom. At their heart, a religious person is someone trying to hang on by the claws to their own status, to the old life.

One writer put it like this, for these Galatian teachers, there was a death they'd refused to die and in the end it was easier to play the part and keep their pride than to embrace the life of Jesus' cross.

But for Paul, that cross was his one great motivation. So what about the mark of a Christian like Paul? How do you spot him?

I think verse 17 is the most extraordinary end to a letter that I've ever seen. Could you ever imagine saying goodbye like this? Here's the final proof, he says, of my authority.

[23 : 18] From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. That's Paul's trump card.

The scars on his body. We've seen so many times that Jesus' spirit drags us to his cross and brings us into conflict with our own flesh.

So surely those scars on Paul's back, the beatings and lashings he took so that others could hear about the cross, surely those cried out louder than words that Paul was walking in step with a crucified savior.

a preacher once put an image in my mind that I'll never forget. He painted a picture of what Paul's back must have looked like. A mess of thick white tangled cords of scar tissue like a plate of spaghetti.

So I hope you'll forgive me for putting it crudely, but it's as if Paul closes his whole letter like this. If you want to know whether I'm a true circumcised Israelite, then you don't pull down my trousers or anything as superficial as that.

[24 : 42] You pull the shirt off my back. That's my mark in the flesh. It's a mark which cold, dead religion could never give you, but the gospel of a self-giving crucified Christ, well, that really could transform the church.

So it's exam time. The last exam you'll ever sit and the clock is ticking. What is your only comfort, both in this life and the next?

Paul writes his answers in big, clear letters. Embrace the cross. It's the only pattern to follow in life and it's the only pride to boast of in death.

He places a full stop and he 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.

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 that we now live for him.

[26 : 22] We ask it through the merit of Jesus Christ, our gracious Lord. Amen.