

*Set Free to Be Free*  
**Part 12 – THE MARK OF FREEDOM**

Galatians 6:11-18

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ September 3, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

**<sup>11</sup>See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! <sup>12</sup>It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. <sup>13</sup>Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. <sup>14</sup>May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. <sup>15</sup>For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! <sup>16</sup>As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.**

**<sup>17</sup>From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.**

**<sup>18</sup>May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.** (Galatians 6:11-18, NRSV)

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This week we come to the end of our series in Galatians. Reflecting back, we have covered a lot of ground but have also skipped over a great deal in this remarkable letter. In fact, I'm convinced we could turn around and go right back through Galatians for another 12 weeks and find no shortage of things God would have to teach us all. I hope the journey has been as enriching for you as it has been for me.

Paul signals the close of his letter with these words, **“See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!”** Having to this point dictated the letter to a scribe, imagine Paul seizing the pen from his scribe's hand to emphasize two things as we writes his conclusion.

First, writing in large letters he wants to strongly emphasize the critical nature of his closing words. This is Paul's version of ALL CAPS. I've got a friend who always writes his emails in ALL CAPS. He could be telling you the most mundane detail, what he had for breakfast, or what time he expects to meet you that day, and he still uses ALL CAPS. I keep looking for an opportunity to gently tell him that he's missing the point. ALL CAPS is for extreme emphasis, for those times when you really want to make sure your audience doesn't miss your point. That's Paul's goal here. If you've missed everything else he's said thus far, don't miss this.

On top of that, Paul writes in his own hand. It's a reminder that this isn't a man writing some theological textbook to anonymous readers but a man writing a personal letter to people he knows and loves. Paul is deeply passionate about what he is writing because he is deeply passionate about the people *to whom* he is writing. He's not just writing to teach them but writing to set them free!

Having gained their attention, Paul reminds the Galatians of the crisis which triggered the writing of this letter. **“It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be**

**circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.”** Again, he’s speaking about these Jewish-Christian missionaries, people he calls Judaizers, who had come to Galatia and were trying to undo Paul’s work in that church. Initially, the church rightly believed the gospel Paul proclaimed, mainly that through Jesus Christ salvation came from God by grace alone, not by works, and was simply to be received in faith. The gospel, in other words, was about what God had done and not about what we had done or needed to do.

But that wasn’t enough for these Judaizers. They had to add something. Specifically, they came teaching that salvation was the gospel *plus circumcision*. Yes, these Gentiles could be saved by believing in Christ’s death and resurrection, but only if they also were circumcised and became Jewish. Only then would they find full favor with God.

This is always what religion does. With religion it is always the gospel *plus something else*. You fill in the blank. The gospel plus good deeds. The gospel plus the right brand of theology. The gospel plus the right politics. The gospel plus involvement in certain specific social causes. The gospel plus you looking, singing, baptizing, voting, speaking some certain way or another. Religion like this is just as alive and well in our day as it was in Paul’s day. We see it in the church anytime people even hint that it is by our own goodness, by our own efforts, by our own anything that we find favor with God. That’s religion, not the gospel!

But why would anybody reject God’s grace in favor of religion? Paul tells us why. First, we **“want to make a good showing in the flesh.”** In other words, there is something in us all that always wants to find some way to take credit for our salvation. In the case of the Judaizers in Galatia, they wanted to be able to point to some impressive number of converts. “Look how many Gentiles we got to circumcise themselves and become Jews!” Not only would other Jews be impressed, but so would God. And if the favor I earn from God is a result of my efforts or goodness then that favor becomes a debt I’m owed rather than a debt I incur.

Think about it. When your employer gives you a paycheck after two weeks of hard work, that’s not a gift. Your employer owes you that money and if they don’t pay up you could rightly take legal action to force them to pay you. You earned that money and now it’s yours to do with what you want. Once you’re paid, you don’t owe your employer anything. You’re square.

On the other hand, when somebody gives you something which you *haven’t* earned or *haven’t* merited in any way, that is a pure gift and if you receive it your sense of undeserved-ness ought to then put you in a place of humble gratitude. In fact, the greater the gift the greater the gratitude. Specifically, if I truly am a sinner who in no way deserves favor and blessing from God and yet, by sheer grace and at infinite cost to himself, God in Christ sacrifices everything, saves me, and welcomes me fully into his family, then there is now nothing God *cannot* ask of me. I am no longer my own but have been bought with a price. I’m in debt!

And this is why religion is always so attractive to people, then and now. If we do enough good in our lives – gain enough converts, go enough of the time to church, give enough money away, pray enough, get our theology right enough, clean our lives up enough, whatever enough - we earn God’s favor and in receiving it as a debt God owes us we can then consider ourselves square with God in the end.

The second reason the Judaizers embraced religion over the gospel is they were afraid. Specifically, they didn’t want to be **“persecuted for the cross of Christ.”** The fact is, people back then, just like people today, find the gospel offensive because, frankly, it’s insulting to be told that there is nothing in you that makes you worthy of God’s favor, that you are too sinful and too weak to do anything to contribute to your salvation, that it is only by grace that you are found acceptable in God’s sight. That’s not the message any of us naturally wants to hear.

When I was kid I was told, probably like you were told, the story of *The Little Engine that Could*. Remember this story? A long train needs to be pulled over a high mountain pass but for various reasons all the large train engines refuse to do the job. As a last resort the request is sent to a small blue engine considered by most too weak for the task. But to everyone's surprise, the little engine agrees to try and, in the end, succeeds in pulling the train over the mountain while along the way repeating the mantra, "I think I can. I think I can. I think I can."

The story has long been a beloved classic because it gives us a beloved message. *You can do it!* You have the potential to become anything you want. Hard work will get you wherever you want to go. You are a good person and don't let anybody tell you different, perfectly acceptable just the way you are. This is the message we love to tell, love to hear, and love to believe. A children's book entitled *The Little Engine that Could Not* would never sell.

The "gospel plus nothing" is offensive. It's offensive to liberal-minded people because it sounds far too exclusive as it insists that the only way for anybody to find salvation is by the grace of Jesus Christ. It's also offensive to conservative-minded people because it insists that "good people" like us are just as in need of God's grace as "bad people" like those people, whoever those people are.<sup>1</sup>

Well, for the Judaizers coming out of a Jewish context built on the belief that favor from God came only to those people who were chosen, and was insured only when those chosen people followed the law as they interpreted the law should be followed (e.g. circumcision), for them the gospel proclamation that all people, Jewish or not, stood equally in need of God's grace and all people were equally loved by God, was offensive because it threatened the very foundations of their religion. They rightly feared that the embrace of such a message would have invited ridicule, if not persecution, from fellow Jews, and so they embraced religion over the gospel.

But the problem was (and is!) that religion doesn't work. As Paul writes in verse 13, "**Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh.**" Even the most faithful Jew in those days could never obey the law as God intended it to be obeyed because the law was never just about outward observances but about inward realities.<sup>2</sup> Just because you make a religious cut in your physical flesh, or go to church on Sunday, or give money to the poor, or pray, or study your Bible, by themselves all these things you are *able to do* are empty because of all that you ultimately are *unable to do*. Specifically, none of us can love God with all heart, mind, soul and strength and love every person we ever meet as much as you love ourselves, the two things Jesus himself said are essential in life.<sup>3</sup>

Take giving money to the poor as an example, which is actually a neutral act in and of itself and only made good or bad by the motive behind the act. Do I give out of guilt or compulsion, or as a way to make myself look better in the eyes of others or God, or as a way to put others in my debt, or as a way to make myself feel better? Or, when I give am I able to make it a completely selfless act, thinking nothing of myself because I am motivated solely by gratitude for what God has already given to me and by a pure love for the person to whom I am giving. I don't know about you, but I don't want my giving examined by somebody who can see with 20/20 vision beyond the external act and into the motives of my heart. When that happens I will always fall short. Religion never works. You see, on closer examination legalists are always lawless, merely fooling themselves that it is by their own moral effort or goodness that they can put God in their debt and earn his favor.

<sup>1</sup> I'm indebted to Timothy Keller for these insights in *Galatians for You* (The Good Book Company, 2013), 180.

<sup>2</sup> Jesus emphasized this point over and over in the Sermon on the Mount when he said things like – and I'm paraphrasing here, "So you think you follow the law by not murdering your neighbor while all along you hate your neighbor in your heart." (Matthew 5:21-26)

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 22:34-40.

And so Paul declares in ALL CAPS, in one of the most powerful verses in the whole letter, **“May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”**

I read a recent editorial in *Christianity Today* magazine which declared, “This is a good year to think about boasting...Boasting is omnipresent in politics and professional sports. It is central to advertising, a surprising amount of corporate life, a wide variety of social media, and, of course, the military. Parents boast in certain products, programs or disciplinary techniques. Influencers boast in their influence and patriots in their nation. Boasting even finds its way into the church.”<sup>4</sup>

When Paul talks about boasting here he’s not referring to the sort of bragging we learn on the playground when I puff out my chest and declare that my dad can beat up your dad. The Greek word here, which actually has no precise English equivalent, means something like, “to glory in, to trust in, to revel in, to live for”. Basically, this is obsession.<sup>5</sup> This is boasting in whatever you see as the ultimate source of identity, security and purpose in life. If it’s your wealth you will always be looking for ways to let other people know how much you are worth. If it’s your status among others you will go out of your way to name drop and position yourself with people you believe can raise your status. If it’s the success of your children, you’ll orient your whole life around their accomplishments and make certain any success they have is broadcast far and wide.

Of course, the obvious question before us here is, “What do you boast in?” What is it for you? For religious people it is their own moral goodness and effort. They obsess about this, because if they can demonstrate, to themselves to others, and ultimately to God, that they are good enough or at least trying hard enough, then they can be convinced that God’s favor belongs to them. And with God’s favor comes ultimate identity, security and purpose in life.

Paul will have none of it! His obsession is with the cross alone! That is all he will boast in. He would agree that God’s favor is the ultimate source of security, identity and purpose in life but because he knows he can never be good enough or try hard enough to earn God’s favor, his only hope is to receive the favor that was won for him by God’s grace when Christ gave his life on the cross.

To the people of his day, however, this made no sense. Remember that in the ancient world the cross signified utter humiliation. It was considered degrading, disgusting, despicable, detestable, and disgraceful. The Roman word for cross, “*crux*”, was actually unmentionable in polite Roman society. It was the “*c*” word. Even when speaking about crucifixion, civilized Romans would avoid the word by referring to the condemned as one who was “hung on the unlucky tree.”<sup>6</sup>

So why in the world would Paul boast in something that was an unspeakable embarrassment to everybody else around him and do so in a way that would offend others to the point of wanting to persecute him and anybody who would suggest that our sin was so bad it necessitated the death of a holy God on the “unlucky tree”? Why? The utter humiliation of cross was Paul’s obsession simply because he knew it was the only way to life.

As he put it, it was by the cross that **“the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.”** In other words, I’m dead to the world and the world is dead to me. It doesn’t have any claim on me anymore. All the ways it uses to measure me and judge me, none of those matter.<sup>7</sup> My identity, security and purpose cannot be enhanced or threatened by anything in the world because these things are all wrapped up in Christ. I’m no

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Wilson, “It’s Not Only Bullies Who Boast”, *Christianity Today* (September, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Galatians* (P&R Publishing, 2005), 274.

<sup>6</sup> Ryken, 274.

<sup>7</sup> As the chorus from the song *Give Me Jesus* declares, “You can have all this world, but give me Jesus.”

longer intimidated by others or feel inferior to others, nor do I feel superior or scornful towards others. So what if others are circumcised and I'm not, that doesn't make them more favored than me. And so what if I'm circumcised and others are not; that doesn't make me more favored than them. As Paul writes, **"For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!"**

What does matter? Nothing short of a new creation! As theologian N.T. Wright puts it,

Not only has the Messiah been crucified. Not only have Christians been crucified with him [in the sense of Jesus dying in our place]. The world itself has been crucified. Calvary was the turning-point of history. The cosmos has had sentence of death passed on it – so that God's new world, God's new creation, can be born out of the old.<sup>8</sup>

The one who entered into creation, even the darkest corners of creation, has died with and for creation so that creation ultimately can be set free! Jesus' resurrection was only the first fruits. What we saw happen at Easter is now at work in the lives of believers and will someday catch fire and spread to all of creation. As Paul puts it elsewhere in his letter to the Romans, **"[Someday] the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."**<sup>9</sup>

All this means that Paul, and anybody who shares his obsession with the cross, is now set free to, along with Christ, give our lives away for the sake of the world, knowing that our sacrifice will not be made in vain. As Paul puts it in the next verse, **"As for those who will follow this rule [i.e. for those who boast in the cross of Christ alone]—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God."** Peace and mercy will follow you wherever you go.

In his final words, which most certainly were written in ALL CAPS, Paul issues a challenge to us all as he writes, **"I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body."** He's speaking literally here. Because of his obsession with the cross, with the gospel that naturally offends everybody, his body now carried the scars of persecution, imprisonment, and torture.

The Greek word Paul uses here for "marks" is *stigmata*. That's what this is about. If you follow Jesus you will be marked by a stigma in this world. The cross, when rightly understood, is offensive to people who live by the mantra "I think I can. I think I can. I think I can.", people who mark their bodies in other ways to prove that they can. Circumcision was the popular choice in Paul's day; we got our own ways in our day.

This is Paul's challenge. Your life will carry one of two marks on it, the marks of the bondage of religion or the marks of the freedom of the gospel, the marks of your own moral effort and goodness or the marks of the cross which come when you confess that grace is the only way forward. Paul's final words of blessing are really a prayer indicating how he hopes we all will choose: **"May the *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen."**

Amen.



## The Next Step

*A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read the text from Galatians 6:11-18 again. What do you notice first? Why?

<sup>8</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2002), 82.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:21, NRSV

2. If you have to summarize Paul's final point as he writes in ALL CAPS in this last section, what would it be? What climactic message is he trying to leave with his audience?
3. How would you describe the difference between religion and the gospel?
4. Are there ways in your life where you are often tempted to try and "make a good showing in the flesh?" It was circumcision for many people back then. What is for you today?
5. How does verse 14 thrill you? How does it challenge you?
6. What do you boast about in your life? What would it mean to boast in the cross of Christ?
7. In what areas of your life do you know the peace of living by the gospel? In which areas of your life are you forfeiting this peace by living for the world's approval?
8. How does the gospel of Jesus Christ set us free to be free?

**Table to Table Question**

***A question for kids and adults to answer  
together***

If you could tell the people you loved the most  
important thing about God that you could ever tell,  
what would you tell them?