

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Cross of Christ

Scripture: Galatians 6:11-14

Code: 80-252

We're going to have a somewhat abbreviated service tonight and get right to sharing in the Lord's Table, but before we do that I do want to turn our thoughts toward the cross. You could open your Bible to the 6th Chapter of Galatians. Galatians 6, and there's here the most interesting passage, one that could certainly demand a lot more attention than we're able to give tonight. It comes at the end of the 6th chapter. It's a passage about the cross of Christ. You'll notice in verse 12 at the end of the verse there's the mention of the cross of Christ that is the first mention in the passage. It is then mentioned again in verse 14, the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is then a passage about the cross.

It is one of the obvious realities in the Christian faith that our insignia is the cross. You see behind me on the back wall a cross. In Christianity in every form that it takes there is some kind of cross as a symbol. Historically there are dozens of crosses and by the way those crosses are depicted you can tell what part of Christian history the people who used that insignia come from. Distinctive crosses, Greek crosses, Coptic crosses, Roman Catholic crosses, Protestant crosses and crosses of all different nuances. They are commonly worn as jewelry by Christians and even non-Christians. Nobody would argue that the single symbol, insignia of Christianity is the cross, but what is somewhat odd about that is the cross is the instrument of torture and death originally devised by the Persians and picked up by the Romans that some would say is the worse instrument of torture ever concocted by man. I think that most of us have been exposed in our lifetime to some of the ancient instruments of torture and perhaps even some modern methods of torture. Nothing has been devised that is as torturous as the cross. It was the worst form of pain and suffering and ultimately suffocation ever devised.

It was also an instrument of degradation because one was suspended there elevated before everyone naked. It was also a representation of the ultimate shame heaped upon some person because only those who were the worst of criminals were ever found on a cross. Around the time of the dying of Jesus there were, according to some historians, at least 30,000 crucifixions in that part of the world done by the Romans, and when they crucified somebody they did so in public places, usually along highways so that the highways in the land of Israel were literally surrounded by people who were dying or dead hanging on crosses. And yet this instrument of torture has become a symbol of all that is precious to Christianity, not because of the torture but because of what Jesus Christ accomplished in literally overpowering the intention of the cross and effecting redemption by that cross. The then has become our symbol.

And so, obviously, in the literature of the New Testament the cross finds a prominent place devised by men to do the worst it was used by God to do the best and that is to affect our redemption. Paul speaks so often then of the cross. Here he does so in this passage at the end of Chapter 6 in Galatians in a quite interesting way. I'll read it to you and then we'll just make a few comments.

Starting in verse 11, He says, "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand." Now this is a curious thing for him to say. Normally when Paul wrote a letter he dictated it and somebody else called an emanuensis, a secretary wrote it down. Paul was not a professional scribe. The New Testament was written in Greek. His native tongue would be Hebrew. Perhaps he was familiar most of all with Hebrew and with Aramaic, although obviously having been educated in Greek culture, he knew Greek. It wasn't his first language or even his second language, and as I said he wasn't a professional scribe and it was pretty much standard operation that someone like the Apostle Paul would dictate and a professional scribe would write down what he dictated.

Scribes wrote in a cursive style, that is, small letters connected. When we talk about cursive we know what we mean if you remember your first years in school. And they wrote in cursive because it was faster and it was smaller, and therefore, they could get more on the page. Those who were the non-professional, those who were perhaps were the non-educated wrote in block letters, which were typically called the unseals, you might remember that word as well.

And Paul is saying here, "I am writing this with my own hand." And as one who is not a professional scribe you can see what large letters, the unseals were large, they were generally an inch in height. And so Paul is not a professional scribe, he is more at home then writing large letters than he is in the art and craft of scribes who wrote small letters in a cursive fashion. He's not making any pretense toward scholarship or pretense toward professionalism, quite the contrary. I am happy is his thought here, I am intentionally writing in this fashion to make a point. And as Paul looked at those large letters, though somewhat untidy letters, if you're English you might use that word, somewhat non-professional look of those letters. He sees in that a parable in the very letters he was writing down.

So in verse 12 he follows it up by saying, "Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh." We'll stop there for a moment. Does he look at those letters he became aware that they became a kind of parable. He really wasn't concerned of how things looked on the outside. He was concerned with the content. It wasn't important to him how good his handwriting was. He was not endeavoring to make some kind of outward display and he sees that as a parable that contrasts the intent of the Judaizers with himself. And he then comments about those who gloried in the flesh.

In verse 12, "Those who desire to make a good show in the flesh." There are those people who are really concerned how things look on the outside. And those are the very people who are compelling you to be circumcised. It's all about the outside. It's all about the physical. It's all about the signs.

It's all about the show. And these Judaizers who had joined the church but never left Judaism, they were trying to bridge both worlds, joining the church to whatever degree believing in Christ, but never letting go of their old patterns and habits, and ceremonies and rituals and externals. They then tried to impose all of them on the church. They demanded that believers in Christ be circumcised, that they keep all the laws of Moses, and all the rituals and ceremonies, traditions. It was all about the outside.

Why did they do that? Verse 12 tells you why. Because they didn't want to be persecuted for the cross of Christ. They did not want to be persecuted. You see the cross was a severe offense to the Jews. And the Jews reaction to a Messiah dying on a cross was very negative and so they began to persecute the church.

One of the early persecutors was a man named Saul. Remember that? He was a persecutor of the church before his conversion. He was going all over the place with official papers from the authorities of Judaism literally putting Christians in prison, if not killing them because they were so offended by a Messiah being crucified by, first of all rejected by them and then crucified by the Romans. These Judaizers, to some degree, acknowledged the Messiahship of Jesus, made some commitment to him, but were fearful of letting go of their Judaism because they were afraid they would be persecuted. They joined the church but held on to the system of works righteousness to keep from being persecuted, to remain in good standing with the Jewish community.

Then in verse 13 he takes it a bit further, "Those who are circumcised, these Judaizers, do not even keep the law themselves. They can't keep the law they say you need to keep, but they desire to have you circumcise that they may boast in your flesh." So first of all they held on to their Judaism in order to prevent themselves from being persecuted, to find some sort of middle ground that made it hard for the Jews to persecute them and to unsynagogue and ostracize them.

Secondly, they compelled believers to be circumcised and to follow the law, the ordinances, the ceremonies of the Mosaic law in order that they might boast about their converts. What a strange position they were in. On the one hand they're affirming Christ, joining the church, on the other hand they're affirming Judaism so that they won't be persecuted, but on the other hand, not only would they not be persecuted but that the Jews might view them as having actually brought people from Christianity into Judaism. This was a strange middle ground that they had managed to create for themselves.

So they were self-righteous, hypocrites, because he says they couldn't keep the law anyway, their fear of persecution, their spiritual pride caused them to sort of stand in the middle. They were hypocrites, they were self-righteous, they were a sham of believers in Jesus Christ because they were not willing to leave the old to embrace the new.

Paul addresses that in verse 13. He says some people may do that. Some people may be caught up in the show, caught up in their appearance, caught up in their external religion, caught up in the machinery of ceremony and worship. Some people may be trying to look good so they don't get persecuted, to look like they're actually bringing people into Jewishness, make a show so they'll be accepted, not persecuted, in fact so they'll be applauded. There's a strange mixture here for the sake of self-preservation, spiritual pride that Paul rejects. "May it never be."

Paul is saying I really don't care what it looks like. You can see the large untidy straggly letters, which I write in my own hand. I don't care about that and that's a parable about how I feel about the outside. I'm not interested in external circumcision. I'm not interested in external legal ceremony. I'm not interested in forms. What I'm interested in is boasting in verse 14, in one thing, he said, "May it never be," magennoitau, the strongest negative in the Greek language. "May it never be that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

I will never boast in circumcision, I will never boast in my attention to the externals, I will never boast in how many proselytes I may have brought into conformity to Mosaic law, I will boast only in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. That was everything for Paul as it is for us, and that's why the cross has become the symbol of Christian faith.

You never see anybody, or at least it's a very rare occasion when you see somebody who is a Christian and has hanging around their neck the Ten Commandments or a dead lamb or an altar of sacrifice or anything that's part of the old system. Paul says, "Through the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. What world is he talking about? He's talking about the religious world. The system, the cosmos, the old system has been crucified. What does it mean to be crucified? It's dead. It's a total disconnect. I don't care about the show anymore. I don't care about the outside. I don't care about the flesh. I don't care about circumcision. I don't care about ceremony and all of those legal matters about diet, etc. etc. that were a part of Judaism. The cross killed all that. It is dead to me and I am dead to it. We have absolutely no connection.

So verse 15, circumcision isn't anything and un-circumcision isn't anything. Doesn't matter. What matters is a new creation. And those who will walk by this principle of new creation, which is internal, peace and mercy be upon them and upon the Israel of God. The Israel of God are the true Jews, the Jews who dropped the old and embraced the new.

So Paul says I'm going to boast and I'm going to glory but only in one thing and it's not going to be my external forms. It's not going to be my religious activities. It's not going to be my ceremonies. It's going to be the cross and at the cross I died completely to the old system. It is dead to me and I am dead to it. That is to say there is no connection, there is no response, there is no stimulus.

The cross is everything. Absolutely everything. The cross has changed me radically. The cross has made me a new creation. The cross has brought to me peace and mercy and made me a member of the Israel of God, the true Jew. Now all Israel is Israel Paul said elsewhere, but I am a member of the true Israel of God. The cross has brought me salvation. That's indicated in the words peace and mercy and also in that identification with the Israel of God.

So Paul establishes here the centrality of the cross as over against any other external forms of religion. In fact, when you come to the cross and you embrace the cross you then become dead to all external religion, all ceremony. All rights and rituals are done away, even those that were once prescribed to the Jews of the Old Testament. And that is why the cross is at the heart of our Christian faith. At the cross we die to sin, we die to religious systems and we live to God and to Christ.

And so it's little wonder that Jesus inaugurated the feast of remembrance by which we could look to the cross and that is this table. The bread represents his body given for us, and the blood is represented by the cup, being shed for us, as he poured out his life a sacrifice for sin. And in his death he provided the salvation that made us a new creation, therefore, circumcision, non-circumcision become meaningless, as does all ceremony. And it's not a matter of show, it's not a matter of the outside, it's what the cross has done on the inside in creating a new creature changing the heart. That's what concerned Paul.

So he says I boast, I glory in the cross because through the cross I have died for all that and I have been born again to a new creation. I am changed on the inside. The outside isn't the issue. If you're going to boast, don't boast about the show, boast about the new creation wrought by the cross. And so as we come tonight to the Lord's Table, we with Paul rejoice in the cross.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2015 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).