

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: True Spirituality
Number: 14
Text: Galatians 6:11-18
Date: May 3, 2009 (a.m.)

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TRUE SPIRITUALITY AND THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS OF CHRIST

What do you consider really important? I suppose this will vary, depending on existing circumstances. But in any given situation or context, the question is worth repeating. What do you consider to be of the utmost importance? Most of us will certainly say our families and those closest to us. But I am asking the question in terms of values and convictions. What was so important to the Apostle Paul? As we carefully read through this epistle, it becomes transparently clear that what mattered most to Paul was the purity of the gospel. The so-called gospel of the Judaizers was not the true gospel with simply a different emphasis; it was no gospel at all (Galatians 1:7). In this scheme we *earn* or *merit* our standing before God (justification). Oh, Jesus Christ was *part* of the message (perhaps even a large part) the Judaizers came preaching; He simply was not the central message. The same can be said of the gospel according to *The Shack*. The centrality of the cross of Christ and its penal substitutionary character is completely missing. What Christ had done simply wasn't enough according to the Judaizers. In their message there are grounds for boasting. In Paul's gospel there are no grounds for boasting (Galatians 6:14; Romans 3:27; 4:1-2).

In this final section Paul will again draw a sharp contrast between law and grace. Today we desperately need (whether we feel it or not!) to grasp the gospel message of the Apostle Paul. Evangelicals in growing numbers are tailoring their message to please the world. We are busy trying to find how to make the gospel unoffensive and in so doing we are losing the gospel. Witness the enormous popularity of Joel Osteen and his refusal to preach the Christ and Him crucified. Osteen recently "preached" at the new Yankee Stadium and one of the New York papers reported, "Considering that he is fast becoming the most popular preacher in the country, Joel Osteen doesn't act or sound like a preacher at all. He has no seminary training and can hardly talk about any religion other than his own brand of creamy, fat-free Christianity (all the hope, none of the sin). He prefers telling endearing domestic stories about himself and his 21st-century friends and relatives to rehashing the dusty tales of Scripture. When he preaches at the new Yankee Stadium on Saturday, becoming the first nonbaseball attraction there, he will be his humble, likable, wavy-haired self and nothing more... 'Our music is not traditional hymns,' he said. 'My message is not about doctrine, I don't have to get 50 references from Scripture in a sermon for it to be a good sermon. Churches that are helping people live out a Christian life are growing and flourishing.'..."¹ Living out the Christian life is *not* the gospel. D. A. Carson recently addressed this wide spread misconception, "one must distinguish between, on the one hand, the gospel as what God has done and what is the message to be announced and, on the other, what is demanded by God or effected by the gospel in assorted human responses. If the gospel is the (good) news about what God has done in Christ Jesus, there is ample place for including under 'the gospel' the ways in which the kingdom has dawned and is coming, for tying this kingdom to Jesus' death and resurrection, for demonstrating that the purpose of what God has done is to reconcile sinners to himself and finally to bring under one head a renovated and transformed new heaven and new earth, for talking about God's gift of the Holy Spirit, consequent upon Christ's resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Majesty on high, and above all for focusing attention on what Paul (and others—though the language I'm using here reflects Paul) sees as the matter 'of first importance:' Christ crucified. All of this is what God has done; it is what we proclaim; it is the news, the great news, the good news. By contrast, the first two greatest commands—to love God with

heart and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves---do not constitute the gospel, or any part of it. We may well argue that when the gospel is faithfully declared and rightly received, it will result in human beings more closely aligned to these two commands. But they are not the gospel. Similarly, the gospel is not receiving Christ or believing in him, or being converted, or joining a church; it is not the practice of discipleship. Once again, the gospel faithfully declared and rightly received will result in people receiving Christ, believing in Christ, being converted, and joining a local church; but such steps are not the gospel. The Bible can exhort those who trust the living God to be concerned with issues of social justice (Isa 2; Amos); it can tell new covenant believers to do good to all human beings, especially to those of the household of faith (Gal. 6); it exhorts us to remember the poor and to ask, not ‘Who is my neighbor?’ but ‘Whom am I serving as neighbor?’ We may even argue that some such list of moral commitments is a *necessary* consequence of the gospel. But it is not the gospel. We may preach through the list, reminding people that the Bible is concerned to tell us not only what to believe but how to live. But we may not preach through that list and claim it encapsulates the gospel. The gospel is what *God* has done, supremely in Christ, and especially focused on his cross and resurrection. Failure to distinguish between the gospel and all the effects of the gospel tends, on the long haul, to replace the good news as to what God has done with a moralism that is finally without the power and the glory of Christ crucified, resurrected, ascended, and reigning.”² This is exactly what Joel Osteen does – he skips over the scandal of the Cross and misdirects people into believing that simply following a formula for finding happiness (with God’s help) constitutes the “gospel.”

“When one looks for the church today,” writes S. Lewis Johnson, “one finds her in the world. And when one looks for the world, one finds it in the church. The church has become the pal of the world, that vicious system that crucified the Savior.”³

I. THE JUDAIZERS AND THE CROSS: PAUL’S FINAL WARNING

Paul’s remarks about his handwriting (verse 11), and calls attention to the seriousness with which the Apostle undertook this epistle. He usually used an amanuensis,⁴ (cf. Romans 16:22; Galatians 6:11; Colossians 4:18), but his concern drove him to write the letter himself.

- A. Their Pride. Legalism *always* produces pride. The Judaizers were not the least bit concerned with the spiritual well-being of the Galatians. They were only interested in their own personal aggrandizement. This is what motivated them in their zeal to capture the allegiance of the Galatians. Like most braggarts, however, their profession did not match their practice. They were not concerned with the gospel or with pleasing God. Instead, they went about seeking to impress others by their outward display of religion. This is a very real snare and one that we do well to avoid. One need not be a legalist at heart to fall prey to this vice; we simply have to be self-centered and self-serving and this will be the inevitable result. We are repeatedly told about the dangers of pride (Romans 12:3; Galatians 6:3; Philippians 2:3; I Corinthians 4:6; I Timothy 3:6).
- B. Their Fear. The gospel of the Judaizer was designed to escape persecution for the cross of Christ. Here, as in Galatians 5:11 where Paul mentions his suffering persecution for the cross, the cross stands for Paul’s doctrine of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone as over against justification by *any* other means. Please note that the Judaizers did indeed have a message which included Christ, but it was very superficial. Their gospel actually *played down* the cross. This is another danger that we too must avoid. “We today are prone to look at the cross (and crucifixion) in a sentimental way. We wear crosses on our lapels or on chains around our necks. But to the first century citizen, the cross was not a beautiful piece of jewelry; it was the lowest form of death and the ultimate humiliation. The proper Roman citizen would never mention the cross in polite conversation. It stood for rejection and shame.”⁵ Apostolic preaching of the cross speaks of the total sufficiency of Christ’s work to save sinners and this rendered human works superfluous. “Because the redemptive work of the cross undercuts every human religious system of works righteousness, it is always a cause for offense and persecution.”⁶

II. PAUL AND THE CROSS: HIS GLORY

Note how the Apostle *contrasts*, not only his gospel with that of the Judaizers, but also his effort and motive. He literally *despises* their message, motives and purposes, but he absolutely glories in the cross of Christ. This was Paul's obsession. Why does the Apostle glory in the cross? Although Paul writes of only one cross in verse 14, he refers to three distinctive crucifixions.

- A. The Crucifixion of Christ. The Apostle could have softened the offensiveness of the cross by simply saying he gloried in the *death* of Christ. But it is in the Cross of Christ, the cross upon which Christ Jesus was crucified, that Paul glories (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:22; 2:2). It is the ground of our acceptance with God. By it, Christ has rescued us from this present evil age (Galatians 1:4) and redeemed us from the curse of the law (Galatians 3:3) and delivered us from the wrath of God (Romans 5:9; I Thessalonians 1:10).
- B. The Crucifixion of the World to Paul. The world and its values (godless materialism, vanity, hypocrisy and idolatry) have been crucified (completely repudiated) in the eyes of the Apostle Paul. Because Paul has been *crucified with Christ* Galatians 2:20), the cross is a barrier by which the world is permanently "fenced off" (ESTAURŌTAI, perfect passive indicative, literally means to stand crucified) from him and he from the world.⁷
- C. The Crucifixion of Paul to the World. The *flesh* (or *sinful nature* in the NIV Bible) "has already been crucified" (5:24); now the world (here it has a moral connotation as it stands in rebellion against God and under His curse) joins it on the cross. "We ought to keep the two main crucifixions of 6:14 in close relation to each other—Christ's and ours. For they are not two, but one. It is only the sight of Christ's cross which will make us willing, and even anxious, to take up ours. It is only then that we shall be able with integrity to repeat Paul's words after him that we glory in nothing but the cross."⁸

III. AN APOSTOLIC BENEDICTION (Galatians 6:16)

Peace and mercy to all who follow (from the verb STOICHEŌ, to walk—the same word as in 5:25 of the believer's keeping in step with the Holy Spirit) *this rule*. What does *rule* refer to? The immediate context points to the standard, i.e., the centrality of the cross. Walking by the Spirit and according to the centrality of the cross go hand-in-hand.

CONCLUSION: You can best answer the question, "*What is really important?*", by asking a second question in light of your answer, "*Why is that so important?*" For Paul, the cross of Christ was the most important thing in the world. Even though the Judaizers had a place for Jesus in their gospel, it was not Christ crucified. In reality they were *enemies* of the cross of Christ (cf. Philippians 3:18). What does this mean? "To be an enemy of the cross is to set ourselves against its purposes. Self-righteousness (instead of looking to the cross for justification), self-indulgence (instead of taking up the cross to follow Christ), self-advertisement (instead of preaching Christ crucified) and self-glorification (instead of glorying in the cross)—these are the distortions which make us 'enemies' of Christ's cross."⁹

The Shack and the Joel Osteen of popular evangelicalism are the personification of the kind of error that plagued the Galatians – Jesus has a place, but it is *NOT* central nor does it have anything to do with Him being a penal substitutionary sacrifice for sin. Osteen claimed that preaching at the new Yankee Stadium would give him a marvelous opportunity "to spread the Gospel" – yet he said nothing about sin or Christ crucified and the need for faith and repentance. Osteen is typical of many preachers, who, in the words of Frank Allred, "either do not know about this teaching, or if they know about it, would rather not mention it. Among the reasons for this, one figures prominently. They think the idea of God being angry would not go down well in our sophisticated society. And the teaching, that by his death Jesus turned God's anger away from us, even less so. If these truths were spread around, it would expose the falsehood that lies behind so much of our preaching today – that God is all love and no justice. But censoring the revealed gospel in this way not only limits our understanding of the atonement, but makes the faithful proclamation

of the gospel impossible. What other explanation can be given for our silence? If we – in particular we who preach – believe what the Scriptures say about the coming wrath, when the ‘Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven in blazing fire’ and ‘punish those who do not obey the gospel with everlasting destruction’ (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10) why do we not say so? If we are convinced that we shall ‘be saved from God’s wrath’ through Christ (Romans 5:9; I Thessalonians 1:10), why have we gone silent about it? It is not as though there is any ambiguity about what the Bible teaches. The satisfaction made to God by the sacrifice of Christ is not an optional element in gospel preaching; it lies at the very heart of it. Our silence actually calls the necessity of the gospel into question because it hides the malady for which the gospel is the remedy. For if God is not hostile against sinners, what need was there for Christ to atone for sins? In Romans chapters one and two, Paul is concerned to show that an awareness of God’s extreme displeasure with human sin is a *necessary* preparation for the gospel message. Sinners do not see their need to be saved until they realize the danger they are in.”¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.lohud.com/apps/pbes.dll/article?AID=/20090422/NEWS02/904220354&templ...> 4/27/2009

² <Http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/publications/34-1/editorial/>

³ S. L. Johnson, Jr., Believers Bible Bulletin: Galatians (Believers Chapel, Dallas, TX, 1978), No. 16, p. 2.

⁴ *Amanuensis* from the Latin, *ā manu*, by the hand. It refers to one who takes dictation, thus a scribe or secretary.

⁵ W. Wiersbe, Be Free: An Expository Study of Galatians (Victor Books, 1975), p. 154.

⁶ J. MacArthur, Jr., New Testament Commentary: Galatians (Moody, 1987), p. 199.

⁷ “For one who makes the cross his supreme, indeed his solitary, ground of boasting all the accepted standards of social life are necessarily turned upside down: a total transvaluation of values has taken place.” F.F. Bruce, New International Green Testament Commentary on Galatians (Eerdmans, 1982), p. 271.

⁸ J. R. W. Stott, The Cross of Christ (IVP, 1986), p. 350.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 351.

¹⁰ Frank Allred, The Eclipse of the Gospel: An Assessment of the Gospel in Today’s Church (Grace Publications, 2001) p. 31.