

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
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The Centrality of the Cross of Christ

I mentioned last week Rich Froning, the CrossFit athlete called “The Fittest man on Earth.” He is also a devout Christian who has Galatians 6:14 tattooed on his rib cage. When asked about the verse, he says it is the most meaningful thing in his life.

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. What Christ had done simply wasn’t enough according to the Judiazers. 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. “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.”¹

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

Paul’s remarks about his handwriting (verse 11) all attention to the seriousness with which the Apostle undertook this epistle. He usually used an amanuensis², (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."³ 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."⁴

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. I 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 2:19), 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.⁵

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."⁶

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.”⁷

¹ S.L. Johnson, Jr., *Believers Bible Bulletin: Galatians* (Believers Chapel, 1978), No. 16, p. 2.

² *Amanuensis* from the Latin, *a manu*, by the hand. It refers to one who takes dictation, thus a scribe or secretary.

³ W. Wiersbe, *Be Free: An Expository Study of Galatians* (Victor Books, 1975), p. 154.

⁴ J. MacArthur, Jr., *New Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Moody, 1987), p. 199.

⁵ “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 Greek Testament Commentary on Galatians* (Eerdmans, 1982), p. 271.

⁶ J.R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (IVP, 1986), p. 350.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 351.