



GALATIANS: GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING
Boast Only In The Cross

Galatians 6:11-18

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Dr. Todd Wilson, *Senior Pastor*

¹¹See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.

¹² 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. ¹³For 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. ¹⁴But 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. ¹⁵For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. ¹⁶And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

¹⁷From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.

Introduction

Galatians exists for grace. It begins with grace (1:3), and ends with grace (6:18). But this is grace that is rooted in the gospel, and grace that flows from the cross of Christ. This is why the grace in Galatians is not cheap grace.

Cheap grace means grace as bargain-basement goods, cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament; grace as the church's inexhaustible pantry from which it is doled out by careless hands without hesitation or limit. It is grace without a price, without costs. . . .

Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.¹

¹ Dieterich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, pp. 43-44.

Oh yes, Galatians exists for grace, but not—as it is so often thought—for cheap grace but for costly grace. “It is costly, because it calls to discipleship; it is grace, because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly, because it costs people their lives; it is grace, because it thereby makes them live. It is costly, because it condemns sin; it is grace because it justifies the sinner.”²

It is costly grace because it calls us *to boast, not in ourselves, but in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ alone*. In fact, boasting in the cross of Christ is the heart of Galatians. The final section of Galatians does more than bring the letter to an end: it reinforces the message of the letter and applies it to the hearers in as forceful a way as possible. The heart of this closing section of the letter is in the first part of verse 14: “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This statement of the Apostle Paul’s is intended to capture the heart of the message of Galatians; this fiery letter is ultimately *a call to the church to boast in nothing but the cross of Christ*.

Most of us know what the cross of Christ is. In the ancient world a cross was a device used to execute criminals; it was like a guillotine or a firing line or an electric chair. It was a gruesome weapon used to intimidate; it was how the sinless Son of God, Jesus Christ, was put to death.

But what does it mean to *boast* in the cross of Christ? We don’t normally talk about boasting, at least not in a good sense; and seldom do we talk about boasting in the cross of Christ.

Boasting is simply a way of an expressing *confidence*. When a person boasts, he’s expressing his confidence in something. We express this confidence either in what we say or in how we live. Boasting is *hope made visible*. No one can see into your soul and find out what you hope in. But they can see and hear what you boast in, what you place your confidence in for a happy future. In fact, you can’t conceal hope; it always shows itself by what you boast in.

Understood in this way, you realize that we boast all the time. We’re constantly expressing our confidence in one thing or another. We can’t help it; we’re hard-wired to hope in something, and whatever we hope in, we will inevitably boast about. Sometimes we boast in objects because we hope in them. We can boast in a reliable car because it gives us confidence in getting us from point A to point B. Or we can boast in a weather forecast because it gives us confidence that our outing won’t be ruined because of rain. Or we can boast in a retirement account because it gives us confidence in a good return and a secure future. Or we can boast in ourselves, our own strength or wisdom or good looks or accomplishments.

The Christian, however, is to boast ultimately in this one thing: the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing else! We’re ultimately to put zero confidence in anything else. And this is because we know there is nothing else that secures for us and for the world a good future with God. We boast in the cross of Christ because we’re convinced that the cross alone is the source of every good we could ever desire or hope for. Nothing else will bring us any good apart from the cross of Christ. This is why you are to boast—to place your hope, your confidence in the cross alone.

² Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, pp. 45.

A Good Showing in the Flesh (6:12-14)

Unfortunately, however, not everyone chooses to boast in the cross of Christ. For many in fact, the cross is foolishness; that is what it means to be an unbeliever: to find the death of Jesus Christ to be human folly, rather than wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:18, 23). This shouldn't shock us because we understand that apart from having the eyes of faith, the cross looks foolish.

Sadly, the same is sometimes true of professing Christians. For some, the cross isn't grounds for boasting, but reason for embarrassment. They'd rather profess the cross than live the cross. This was Peter's predicament, when he found out the Jesus was going to go to Jerusalem to be crucified. He was more interested in Jesus receiving a crown than being hung from a cross.

This was the path of the Judaizers in Galatia. They opted to boast not in the cross, but in themselves. "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. 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" (vv. 12-13).

The Judaizers weren't interested in anyone's best interest but their own. They sought to save face, literally, "to make a good showing in the flesh" (v. 12), by insisting the Galatians get circumcised. This was their cleverly devised plan to avoid suffering persecution from other Jews who rejected Jesus as Messiah; this was their way of avoiding the reality of the cross of Christ.

Thus, Paul sees them trying to save their own lives rather than losing their lives for Jesus' sake and in the service of others (Mark 8:35). Like some professing Christians, the Judaizers didn't view the cross of Christ as that narrow road they must walk in the service of others; instead, they saw the cross as a card you play to get out of jail free and avoid any penalties.

You see, for some the cross is little more than a symbol to be professed; it's not a reality to be embraced. It's easy to display the cross; it's hard to live it. Christians have been adorning their churches, and their bodies, with crosses for years. But sometimes we often run from the reality of the cross in our own lives; we'd rather wear the cross, than live it!

Death to This Deadly World (6:14)

Paul, however, draws the sharpest possible contrast with the Judaizers—and anyone else who would hide from the cross of Christ. "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 14).

Yet why would anyone want to boast in the cross of Christ? After all, this is an instrument of execution, a gruesome tool of injustice. What Paul, and anyone else who boasts in the cross of Christ, realizes is this: *the cross kills this deadly world*. This is what Paul says about the cross, what he boasts in: "the world has been crucified to *me*, and *I* to the world."

The world is deadly. The world is a place with a 100% mortality rate. We made it that way (cf. Rom. 5:12). Now, you might say, this fallen world is paying us back.

But the only thing deadlier than the world, is the cross of Christ. Through the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, God has dealt a fatal blow to the fallen world. And pretty soon the world shall breathe its last breath and be no more. Never has the world engineered a more effective tool of

execution than the cross. Yet, in the wisdom of God, the world's cruelest tool has been turned against it, not out of spite but as a demonstration of divine love.

The cross kills the world. But it does so by starting on the inside, then working out. The cross kills the world not by inciting religious jihad against others, but by crucifying the sinful nature in your soul. This is what I mean when I say the cross begins its work on the inside; it starts with you, your heart and your soul, your very inmost person. For the stain of sin runs that deep, all the way down into the core of who you are.

The Puritans talked about mortification of indwelling sin; that is, the Christians responsibility to put to death the misdeeds of the body, as Paul says (Rom. 8:13). This is what it means to have the world crucified to you, and you to the world. At the end of Galatians 5, Paul says "those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (v. 24). This is death to the world; that is, putting the world to death in you by crucifying the flesh.

In the way of the cross, there's no getting around death. There's no other alternative. The only choice is whether you are going to die *with* the world, or die *to* the world.

A Clearing for the New Creation (6:15)

Death is not the ultimate goal of the cross; Life is. God's designs go beyond crucifixion: they include resurrection, newness of life, indeed new creation. When God sent his Son to die in our stead on the cross at Calvary, he was dealing a death-blow to this deadly world, but he was also blowing wide open a hole in this fallen world, big enough for a whole new creation to begin streaming in. *Thus, the cross clears the way for the new creation.*

In the Christian story, the cross is followed by the resurrection; death is answered with life. Jesus Christ was crucified, he died, and was buried; yet on the third day, he rose again from the dead. And he is the bright morning star, the firstborn from among the dead. He is "the first and the last, and the living one" (Rev. 1:17-18). He is the one "who died and came to life" (Rev. 2:8).

Therefore, he is "the beginning of God's creation" (Rev. 3:14). The beginning of which creation? The first creation? Yes, certainly. But, in this passage, the point is that he is the beginning of God's *new creation*. His own resurrection body is the literal in-breaking of the new creation. Thus, he is also the Risen Lord who declares to the church and the world: "Behold, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5).

But how is he doing that? And where is he doing that? He is making all things new by his Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God, who is, as the Creed says, the Lord, the Giver of Life. And he is bringing forth this new creation in the hearts and lives and community of his people, the church. We are the vanguard of the new creation. For this is where the Spirit is making all things, doing that extreme makeover in our lives to re-create us in the image and likeness of our Creator. He is infusing our lives with his presence and thereby adorning our lives with his character.

The fruit of the Spirit—these are foretastes of what's to come, the first-fruits of the new creation. And while we only experience this new creational reality in part now, we can be confident that we will one day experience it in all its fullness, when the knowledge of the glory of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14).

The cross rescues us from this present evil age (cf. 1:4). The cross unleashes the powerful presence of the Spirit (cf. 3:1-5). The cross clears the way for Abraham's blessing (cf. 3:10-14). The cross ushers in the era of adoption and sonship (4:1-7). The cross gives birth to new freedom (4:21-5:1). The cross of Christ enables the presence of God.

Therefore, friends, we realize that the only thing that counts is the new creation. Because of the cross, because of what God has done in Christ, old creation priorities no longer matter. In the old world, this fallen world, things like race and class and ethnicity count a whole lot. But they don't where we're headed.

Promise of Peace and Mercy (6:16)

As the people of God, then, we not only have the privilege of experiencing the in-breaking of the new creation in our own lives, as we encounter the power and presence of the Spirit transforming us into new creatures. But we also bear the responsibility of embodying the hope of the new creation in our life together; we are the vanguard of the new creation. We exist to point the world to what is coming in Christ.

And as we, as the people of God, live out the new creation, both individually and corporately as a body, we bear powerful witness to this dying world of a world that is yet to come.

Thus, we remind ourselves continually of this promise, and we hold out this promise to the watching world: "And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God" (6:16).

Peace and mercy, are these not the longing of every human heart? But where can they truly be found? Only there at the cross! Peace and mercy are purchased at the cross. Peace and mercy are promised for the new creation. And when you come to Christ and are indwelt by his new creational Spirit, you experience this peace and mercy in part. But not yet in its fullness. That will only come with the dawning of the new creation. Then, we will know as we are fully known; we will know the full riches of his glory which he has intended for we who are the vessels of his mercy (Rom. 9:23).

In the meantime, in this world, we are called to live the cross in our daily lives; to pattern our existence after the existence of our sacrificial, suffering Savior, who died in our stead on the tree, coming under God's judgment so that we might receive new life (3:13-14). And so we come again and again to the cross of Christ, to find peace and mercy. Because of the cross of Christ, we now stand forgiven, acquitted, justified before God. "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). Regardless of our circumstances, we can nevertheless rest confident in our right standing with God; indeed, more than that, we can be *confident* of our right standing with God—we can even "boast in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2).

The Marks of Jesus (6:17)

When your confidence is in the cross of Christ, you begin thinking and saying and doing some pretty strange things. "No confidence." "Boast in weakness."

But what does it mean, practically speaking, to boast in the cross of Christ? To boast in the cross of Christ means to be willing to bear on your body the marks of Jesus.

Do you bear the marks of Jesus in your life, perhaps even on your body? Are there any visible, even tangible evidences of the cross in your life? If I looked at your bank account, would I see the marks of Jesus? If I looked at your calendar, would I see the marks of Jesus? Or would someone need to look pretty long and hard to find anything resembling the sufferings of our Savior?

To boast in the cross means to remain undeterred in your pursuit of Christ. In fact, you stay confident, even when following Christ is costly.

You adopt this kind of attitude: "From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (v. 17). You're not intimidated by the world; it can no longer bully you the way it once did. You're no longer conformed to the pattern of this world; instead, you're being transformed by the renewing of your mind (Rom. 12:1).

The marks of Jesus, those tangible reminders of how you've suffered with Christ for the sake of others, are the sign of your authenticity. How do you know you're real, as opposed to fake? Because you bear on your body, you have in your life, the marks of crucifixion. What would you point to as the marks of Jesus? I suspect if you were asked this question point-blank, some of you might squirm a bit.

Some of you would want to point to the so-called 'crosses' you bear: you were too short to play high school basketball, you didn't get into the college of your choice, you never made the kind of money you wanted to make, you married the wrong person, you chose the wrong career path. But all these personal disappointments don't constitute the marks of Jesus. The pain that comes from personal disappointments aren't the marks of Jesus. The pain of personal sacrifices for the sake of others—these are the marks of Jesus. You're not living a cross-centered life by enduring disappointments but by denying yourself for the sake of others.

When Paul says he bears on his body the marks of Jesus, what do you think he has in mind? Male-pattern baldness? A crooked nose? Not married? Born in Tarsus rather than Rome? No, he had in mind the suffering he endured in order to advance the gospel in the lives of other people.

Understand, then, that the Christian life is going to be messy. If it's all tidy, it's probably not Christian; at least, it's not cross-shaped. Do you think Christ's life was tidy, all under control, a place for everything and everything in its place?

Let's recall the contours of Christ's life: He had no home, no college education, no form of employment. He had a reputation for over-drinking and over-eating. He was out of favor with the most learned and well-established religious leaders of his day; in fact, they despised him. He was accused of being demon possessed. Even his own family members, his mother and sibling, thought he was out of his mind. He was betrayed by one of his closet colleagues and abandoned by all of his friends. He was brought up on serious criminal charges, judged to be guilty and sentenced to death. He was first stripped naked and then executed in broad daylight, alongside two other certifiable criminals. And even in his dying hour, as he strained to hold onto life, those who watched and those who passed by mocked him.

Is there, then, friends, anything tidy about this life? Is there anything safe about this Savior? Is there anything predictable about the Son of God? Beware, therefore, of the sanitized Christian life! For it may be Christian in name only, not in substance or reality.

And yet Jesus Christ endured it all, not for its own sake, but for the sake of those he came to save.

Grace Be With You (6:18)

Galatians exists for grace. But the grace in Galatians is *costly* grace, not cheap grace. And God wants both to comfort and comfort you with this grace. Comfort you with all the provisions and promises that flow from the cross of Christ; confront you with the call to boast only in the cross of Christ, the call to discipleship. Galatians calls us to discipleship, costly discipleship, not cheap discipleship, not easy believism, nominalism, formalism, moralism, religiosity or the like; not superficial or cookie-cutter or cultural Christianity.

It calls us to gospel-rooted living. This means boasting in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, confident that no good thing exists apart from the cross of Christ. Is your life rooted in the gospel? Are you boasting in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ alone? Yet as you embrace the call of discipleship, grace will be with you. “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ [will] be with your spirit, brothers” (v. 18).

Amen.

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