



GALATIANS: GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING

Cruciformity: The Shape of Gospel-Rooted Living

Galatians 2:17-21

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But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. ¹⁹For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. ²⁰I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

Introduction

In our journey through Galatians we've grappled with different aspects of what a gospel-rooted life looks like. But today's passage takes us to the very heart of gospel-rooted living. In these verses Paul defines for us the essence of what it means to live a life rooted in the saving work of Jesus Christ.

You will recall how the Apostles Peter's unfortunate hypocrisy in Antioch called for open rebuke from the Apostle Paul (2:11-14). But it also called for clarification of the truth of the gospel; this Paul provides in 2:15-16, in all likelihood a continuation of his words of rebuke to Peter. But, notice, Paul doesn't stop there. Instead, he goes on in 2:17-20 to offer a positive example of what it means to live out the truth of the gospel. And the positive example is his own example; Paul is the paradigm of gospel-rooted living (cf. 4:12).

So, you need to see in these verses not merely a bunch of interesting theological ideas; instead, you need to see a provocative description of a gospel-rooted way of life. What he describes, then, is the shape the gospel has taken in his own life. And that shape is the shape of the cross; or, as he says: "I have been crucified with Christ" (2:20). Thus, at the heart of gospel-rooted living is cruciformity. Life in Christ is all about being crucified with Christ.

Cruciformity, like Paul experienced, comes from taking gospel-risks for the good of others. That's the shape your life will take, if your life is truly rooted in the gospel so that it overflows for the good of others. If the gospel's in your life, God won't let you be conformed to the pattern of this world; instead, he will transform you into the image of his Son; and your life will

increasingly look like his life. Which means your life will look like a crucifixion: sacrificial giving of yourself for the sake of others. That's the form it will take: cruciformity—conformity to the cross of Christ.

Christ is Not a Servant of Sin! (2:17-18)

Cruciformity is the shape Paul's life takes when he pursues gospel ministry. Why? Because he was driven to reach Gentiles with the good news of Jesus Christ. But in order to effectively proclaim the gospel to them, he had to live among them and interact with them. "To those outside the law," Paul says, "I became as one outside the law . . . that I might win those outside the law" (1 Cor. 9:21). And this meant eating and drinking together; sharing their meals and sharing their lives.

Yet Paul's approach to winning Gentiles made some Jews really nervous. In fact, the Jews of a stricter persuasion were convinced Paul went too far. He related to Gentiles in ways that were simply unacceptable; even unlawful. "When you're with the Gentiles, Paul, you act just like the Gentiles. It's hard to tell you're any different. But don't you realize this makes your Messiah and ours an accomplice to their sin?"

No doubt, Paul heard these kinds of accusations regularly. In fact, we hear him respond to this sort of charge in 2:17. "But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?" Notice what's implied in this rhetorical question. Paul here freely acknowledges that from a strict law-observant Jewish standpoint, he could be judged a "sinner." Because he would "live like a Gentile and not like a Jew" (2:14) to reach Gentiles, Paul would appear to the stricter types to be little different than "Gentiles sinners" (2:15). Paul doesn't disagree; nor does he try to avoid that charge against him.

However, what Paul strongly denies is that this makes Christ "a servant of sin" (2:17). "God forbid," Paul says; or shouts, as the case may be. "For if I rebuild what I tore down, [only then would] I prove myself to be a transgressor" (2:18). Paul would transgress the will of God only if he did what Peter did in Antioch. If Paul would have withdrawn from table-fellowship with Gentiles, he would in effect have rebuilt what Jesus Christ died to tear down: namely, "the dividing wall of hostility" between Jews and Gentiles (cf. Eph. 2:14). Therefore, call Paul what you want—a miscreant, a sinner, an apostate—he doesn't violate God's will or nullify God's grace; in fact, in his ministry to Gentiles he's magnifies it (2:21).

The Price to Be Paid For Ministry Among Gentiles (2:19-20a)

But by admitting that he can be judged to be a sinner, Paul acknowledges that there is a price to be paid for his ministry to Gentiles. He knew as a Jew there was a price he would have to pay in order to maintain his mission to Gentiles for it left him constantly exposed to the charge that he was in violation of the expectations for one who claims to be a faithful Jew.

From Paul's own testimony, we know that he continued to be not only accused of being in violation of the law, but punished because of it. Thus, when he would visit synagogues, he'd be brought up on charges, and then often flogged with a whip or a stick. "Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was

stoned” (2 Cor. 11:24-25).¹ And to think of the bellyaching I’m prone to do when I’m only slightly inconvenienced in the service of Christ!

No wonder Paul talks about his relationship to the law as one marked by death. “For through the law I died to the law” (2:19). He had to pay the price for ministry among Gentile sinners; and that price was the death-dealing *curse* of the law. Thus, through the curse of the law he died to the curse of the law. By routinely coming under the discipline of the law, the law’s intimidating curse no longer had a hold of his heart; he no longer feared its judgment. You’ll recall how in Antioch Peter stopped living like a Gentile because he feared the circumcision party and what they could do to him: forty lashes less one! But Paul stood his ground there and elsewhere; he was willing to pay the price for continued ministry among Gentiles, even if it meant another beating.²

And so this beat-up apostle can say with great gospel-rooted conviction and resignation: “I have been crucified with Christ” (2:20). That’s the kind of life I live—crucified with Christ. I’ve been put on trial and brought up on false charges just like Jesus; and I’ve even been executed as a transgressor of the law just like Jesus (2:19; cf. 3:13). Thus, I’ve truly learned, as Jesus said, that a disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master (Matt. 10:24). Cruciformity is for every follower of Christ.

Don’t be surprised, then, if as a follower of Christ you suffer a little mistreatment because of your ministry to others. There is a price to be paid for gospel ministry. If you’re not willing to pay the price with your life, you’re not going to see the gospel go forward through your life. But if you want to see the gospel advance, it’s going to mean cruciformity. Your life will be conformed to the cross. But know that God will do great things with that.

God has often worked powerfully through cruciformed people. In fact, sometimes he uses the cruciformity of his people to renew whole countries. This happened in eighteenth-century Britain, where God raised up a generation of valiant early Methodist evangelists—Howell Harris, George Whitefield, and Charles and John Wesley—who were more than willing to be crucified with Christ for the sake of the gospel. Listen to how one historian of this period explains how their willingness to embrace cruciformity was used mightily in the salvation of souls.

If Methodism had not come into contact with the mob it would never have reached the section of the English people which most needed salvation. The “Religious Societies” shut up in their rooms, would never have reformed the country.

It was necessary that a race of heroic men should arise, who would dare to confront the wildest and most brutal men, and tell them the meaning of sin, and show them the Christ of the Cross and of the Judgment Throne.

¹ Harvey, A. E. (1985). Forty Strokes Save One: Social Aspects of Judaizing and Apostasy. Alternative Approaches to New Testament Study. A. E. Harvey. London, SPCK: 79-96.

² See the article by Colin Kruse, “The Price Paid for a Ministry Among Gentiles.”

The incessant assaults of the mob on the Methodist preachers showed they had reached the masses. With a superb courage, rarely, if ever, equaled on the battlefield, the Methodist preachers went again and again, to the places from which they had been driven by violence, until their persistence wore down the antagonism of their assailants. Then, out of the once furious crowd, men and women were gathered whose hearts the Lord had touched.³

Resurrection Living (2:20-21)

Like these great eighteenth-century evangelists, the apostle Paul was fearless before the threat of the crowds. He wasn't intimidated by the opinion or accusation of others; their disapproval didn't impede the gospel ministry God had called him to. He didn't even fear the accusations of the law. For he knew that his own Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, had already endured the curse of the law when he hung on a tree (cf. Gal. 3:13; Deut. 21:23). And what was the upshot of that for Jesus—banishment from God as one who's accursed, or, vindication from God as one who's righteous?

You see, cruciformity in the cause of Christ never ends with the curse of death. It always leads to the glorious dawn of the resurrection from the dead. "I have been crucified with Christ," Paul says. But he doesn't stop there, with death. He goes on to speak of the resurrection life he now lives. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (2:20). Paul was tried like Jesus; executed like Jesus; raised like Jesus; and thus now he lives to God. His life is continually marked by cruciformity; but it is therefore continually sustained by resurrection power!

Realize, then, that a gospel-rooted life inevitably leads to a crucified life. If you're truly rooted in the saving work of Jesus Christ, you will experience an ongoing kind of death; call it a continual crucifixion with Christ. You cannot be firmly rooted in the gospel and not experience a kind of sacrifice and suffering that we might very well call death; if there's no death in your life, there's probably no gospel either.

However, you should have great confidence in the fact that resurrection awaits you on the other side of every experience of crucifixion. "I have been crucified with Christ." But that doesn't mean you stop living. That only means Christ lives in you. His resurrection life takes over your earthly life. So, then, while you may end up dying to what you hold dear in this life, you will nevertheless live to God; for the same one who raised Jesus from the grave will raise you up in this life, as you give up your life in the service of him.

This is why, then, you can only live this cruciform way of life in one way: namely, by faith. Because without faith, not only is it impossible to please God; it's impossible to live a cruciform, gospel-rooted life. But this faith that marks your new resurrection way of life is not faith in something abstract or obtuse; no, it is by faith in the crucified Christ, "the one who loved me and gave himself for me" (2:20).

³ Cited in Arnold Dallimore, George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival (Volume 2; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1980), p. 160.

If you truly wrap your life around the life of Christ; if Jesus truly lives within you, then Christ who is in you will do what Christ did in his earthly life; he loved others and gave himself for others. So, too, this life in you will cause you to do the same. Cruciformity is, then, *conformity to the self-giving action of the Son of God*. What shape did Jesus' own loving and giving take? It took on, of course, the shape of the cross. That's where he demonstrated his love for you and gave himself for you.

Conclusion

You see, then, the shape that the gospel took in the life of the Apostle Paul. But what shape has it taken in yours? When people get a good look at who you are, do they see the cross of Christ? Is your life conformed to the pattern of the cross? Is cruciformity the shape of your life?

Cruciformity is the shape of gospel-rooted living; not conformity to the pattern of this world, but cruciformity to the cross of Christ. This is our Christian calling and challenge: not to be enslaved to the ways of this world, but to walk in step with the truth of the gospel; to take up our cross and follow after Jesus Christ.

If you want others to see Jesus Christ, then consider what sort of radical gospel-oriented sacrifice you can make for the good of other people, so that they can see the cross of Christ in your own life. Or, as Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me," Jesus said, "let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Let him live a gospel-rooted life—a cruciform life!

Amen.

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