



## DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

GALATIANS 6

SEPTEMBER 2022

### THE CROSS IS THE CRUX

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*See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. 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. But 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. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.*

Galatians 6:11-18 ESV

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When a person sees the cross as the center of the Bible story, it is either the best news ever... or the worst.

Paul summarizes his letter to the Galatians in chapter 6, verses 11-18. Paul had preached his radical version of the biblical story to those in Galatia, and it was accompanied with such power that many were transformed. Grace had made them gracious. They believed the message and honored the messenger. Then some agitators from Jerusalem came to the area and proclaimed a different message while calling it the good news of Jesus. Theirs was a message, not of a new creation, but of a

continuation of the Jewish story, including adherence to the laws prescribed in the Torah and their rabbinical interpretations. Paul is visibly upset and declares that their message is no gospel at all and curses any attempt to alter the message he presented. In this summary, we see a clear comparison of the agitators and the true believers in the gospel. We see the motivations of both, the goal of both, and the resulting fruit of both. It leads us to ask three essential questions as we approach the gospel.

The "Judaizers" from Jerusalem did not want to lose their standing with their culture and thereby wanted to incorporate

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the new message about Jesus into their old story. To buy into Paul's message would mean to cut ties with those who demanded compliance with the Jewish culture. Their goal was to make a good impression. They wanted to be applauded or at least accepted. Rejection is too high a price to pay for religious beliefs. The trap of having such a goal is that it makes one a slave to their culture. The values of the culture determine the values a person must hold. In their case, it was the importance of Jewish identity markers such as circumcision, sabbaths, feasts, and dietary requirements. They wanted to boast about the numbers of converts they were making to their message, not because it would benefit the convert, but so they could brag about the numbers.

We can easily make an application for us today. The values of our culture are pretty much parallel. We value appearance, perception, numbers in our group, followers on social media, size of congregations, symbols of success, and tolerance as defined by the culture, entertainment, comfort...consumer demands. And of course the most prominent value in the religious arena is being good so we can be blessed. This proposition sounds good to us all and we are willing to give it a try. After all, getting God's blessing is worth sacrificing some things.

What was the primary motivation of the Judaizers? They feared persecution. They wanted to protect image, reputation, and perception. They feared the persecution that would include exclusion from the synagogue-culture. A true symptom of man-made religion is the motivation of fear. The fear of loss is a powerful motivation and can move people to justify all kinds of

strange behavior—even destroying the lives of those who appear to threaten the status quo. (They wanted to kill Paul.) We are not exempt. All of us are motivated by either love or fear. If it's not love as demonstrated by Jesus, it is fear. Fearing what we might lose causes us to attempt obedience to various rules, but never with joy.

When the goal is cultural acceptance and the motivation is fear, the fruit will inevitably be outward performance. Visible identity markers are important whether it is circumcision or protestant baptism. It can be going down front at the altar call, or speaking in tongues, or attendance at church services. It can be the specific religious language we use and the catch phrases that signify our identity with an accepted group. These can be learned, but the transformation of the heart will be revealed in the midst of the storms that inevitably come into every life. Those who place inordinate emphasis on external markers will be guilty of demanding compliance but practicing compromise.

Paul contrasted the agitators with his own situation and what he had previously seen in the true believers before they had been seduced by the Judaizers. Their goal was to boast in the cross. They were aware that there was no other way to be reconciled to God, to be restored to the original purpose of humankind, to experience the peace that had been longed for in the previous centuries. They could think of nothing more important to them than the work Jesus had done at the cross that revealed the true nature of God, the true depth of sin's deprivation, and the only hope for eternity. They had come to realize the freedom that causes one to continuously brag on Jesus and his

salvation. In fact, they had found that such boasting was freedom from fear, lack, worry, and shame. Arguably, Paul's declaration is the greatest expression of freedom ever uttered: "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14 NRSV). Now that is free! He is declaring for himself and all others who embrace the gospel of grace that we live in such a new creation that the surrounding cultures have no strings attached to us. The values of any earthly culture do not determine ours. We are dead to the appeals from the world of striving and manipulating. It is neither religion nor non-religion. The issue is a new creation bought by the cross and the subsequent resurrection. God has completed the Old Testament story in the person of Jesus, the last Adam and the obedient Israelite. Every blessing He has ever desired to give us is now offered. The covenant has been kept. The New Covenant has produced a new reality, a new people, and new identity markers. Our goal is to boast in the cross. Our motivation is the love that is demonstrated in the cross of Christ, and our fruit is the peace and mercy that was promised by God through Isaiah centuries before:

*"Fear not, for you will not be ashamed;  
be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced;  
for you will forget the shame of your youth,  
and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.  
For your Maker is your husband,  
the LORD of hosts is his name;  
and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,  
the God of the whole earth he is called.  
For the LORD has called you*

*like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit,  
like a wife of youth when she is cast off,  
says your God.*

*For a brief moment I deserted you,  
but with great compassion I will gather you.*

*In overflowing anger for a moment*

*I hid my face from you,*

*but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,"*

*says the LORD, your Redeemer.*

*"This is like the days of Noah to me:*

*as I swore that the waters of Noah*

*should no more go over the earth,*

*so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you,*

*and will not rebuke you.*

*For the mountains may depart*

*and the hills be removed,*

*but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,*

*and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,"*

*says the LORD, who has compassion on you.*

*"O afflicted one, storm-tossed and not comforted,*

*behold, I will set your stones in antimony,*

*and lay your foundations with sapphires.*

*I will make your pinnacles of agate,*

*your gates of carbuncles,*

*and all your wall of precious stones.*

*All your children shall be taught by the LORD,*

*and great shall be the peace of your children.*

*In righteousness you shall be established;*

*you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear;*

*and from terror, for it shall not come near you.*

*If anyone stirs up strife,*

*it is not from me;*

*whoever stirs up strife with you*

*shall fall because of you.*

*Behold, I have created the smith*

*who blows the fire of coals*

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*and produces a weapon for its purpose.  
I have also created the ravager to destroy;  
no weapon that is fashioned against you shall  
succeed,  
and you shall refute every tongue that rises  
against you in judgment.  
This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD  
and their vindication from me, declares the  
LORD.”*

Isaiah 54:4-17 ESV

Paul, speaking to those who relish rules, says in effect: “If you want a rule, here it is: Jesus has fulfilled all the promises of peace and mercy for his people. It is about the cross, not circumcision.” He also seems to play on their fascination with having their bodies marked with circumcision. He offers a new mark: scars from persecution. Of course the primary identity marker is the life of the Spirit that displaces the strivings of the flesh.

So what are the questions Paul's letter prompts us to address?

1. What do I want? A good impression with all the benefits of acceptance and applause (maybe even fame) or the freedom to praise at all times because the cross has freed me from the pull of earthly treasures?

2. What do I fear? A loss of reputation, lack of security, perceived significance, rejection, punishment or that I might boast in something less than the cross of Jesus Christ that gives me confidence and hope?

3. In what do I boast? What I have achieved, what attributes I have, accomplishments I have done, religious experiences, intellect, skills, race or what God has done for me in His finished work on the cross, the confidence that

gives, the compelling love He continually offers, and the contentment that it produces?

From Paul's point of view, the cross of Jesus Christ is the crux of the matter, the climax of the story, and the only hope of eternal life.



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