



It must have been a dramatic moment—the world premiere of a letter written by the apostle Paul himself. A small church in a small Galatian village had gathered for a public reading of Paul's very own words, written just for them! As the letter came to a close, they sat up in their seats and heard him say, "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand." I can just see the reader holding up the papyrus to show everyone in the room the large print portion of Paul's letter.

In composing this letter, up to that point Paul had been dictating his words to his *amanuensis*, or secretary. But, as was the custom, he would have finished the letter in his own handwriting. It was the stamp of his own apostolic authority. The large letters were like finishing an e-mail in all caps. He wants to underscore and emphasize these final words.

This final paragraph of Galatians is more than a quickly scribbled goodbye. It's not an afterthought. Instead, these verses take all that Paul has said until now and boil it down to a flaming arrow, shot into the hearts of the Galatians, piercing them with a choice. The choice was really between two ways of living. It's a choice we have to make, too. It's a choice between religion and the gospel.

Paul is trying to steer them towards a gospel-centered life. To that end, he contrasts himself with the Judaizers who had come into the church of Galatia and added to his message. He basically says, "This is what they're about. This is what I'm about. We represent two very different approaches to a relationship with God. You need to make a choice. You can't have it both ways."

Listen to Paul's words from Galatians 6:11–18. Here are five contrasts between religion and the gospel.

"See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh. But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-

marks of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you spirit, brethren. Amen."

Outward or Inward?

The first contrast is between the outward and the inward. Religion is fundamentally about the outward; it's about external rituals and ceremonies. But the gospel is about what happens inwardly to the heart.

It's obvious the Judaizers in Galatia focused on something outward, namely circumcision. Paul says in v.12, "*they try to compel you to be circumcised.*" In v.13 he says they themselves "*are circumcised*" and they "*desire to have you circumcised.*" That's why they were sometimes even called "the circumcision party." Their rallying cry was "*Unless you're circumcised...you can't be saved*" (Acts 15:1).

Now of course circumcision had its place in the history of the Jewish people. For us today the issue isn't circumcision. But we too can place an emphasis on outward religion. The most obvious example is baptism. Next week we'll baptize several people at our Outdoor Service. Baptism is important. Jesus was baptized. He gave us baptism to use as a powerful symbol of our new life in Christ. But it would be absolutely wrong to somehow make this outward symbol a means of or requirement for salvation. It's the same with communion. Religion fixates on ceremonies or rituals.

But the gospel is all about an inward transformation. Down in v.15 he says, "*For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.*" What matters isn't outward rituals like circumcision and baptism, but whether you've become a new creation in Christ. He's talking about spiritual rebirth. Jesus said to a very religious man named Nicodemus, "*You must be born again*" (Jn. 3:7). Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*" (2 Cor. 5:17). This inward work of spiritual birth isn't something we can manufacture ourselves; it's something God does to us on the basis of faith in Christ.

When author Lee Strobel became a Christian his daughter Allison was five years old. All she had known in those five years was a dad who was profane and angry. He remembers coming home one night and kicking a hole in the living room wall just out of frustration with life. More than once Allison had to hide in her room to get away from him. But five months after he gave his life

to Christ, Allison went to his wife and said, "Mommy, I want God to do for me what he's done for Daddy." That's a five-year-old! In essence she was saying, "My dad is a new creation. He used to be a bear to live with; now he's different. If that's what God does to people, then sign me up." That's what the gospel does to people. That's the difference between religion and the gospel; outward ritual and inward transformation.

Man's work or God's work?

The second contrast is between man's work or God's work. Religion is fundamentally about what we do for God. The gospel is about what God does for us. Circumcision isn't only an outward ritual but it's a human work. It was symbolic of a larger commitment to keep the law of Moses. These people insisted on keeping the law because they believed their salvation depended on it. If someone asked the Judaizers how to be saved they probably would have mentioned the death of Jesus on the cross, but they wouldn't have stopped there; they would have added that we also have to keep the Jewish laws.

Paul challenges this. In essence, he calls their bluff. He says in v.13, "*those who are circumcised do not even keep the law themselves.*" In other words, if this is the way to salvation, good luck! No one, even the most religious among you, will make it. Every Jew knew the Ten Commandments. The tenth one says "You shall not covet." What does that mean? That means every time you desire to have what someone else has, you've broken God's law. Most of us started coveting the minute we drove into the parking lot! We saw someone driving a better car than ours and we wanted it. We saw someone grab a parking space and we wished it was ours. We walked inside and saw someone with a very cool pair of jeans we would look great in but can't afford and we were angry. Then we sat down and watched as a couple walked in holding hands and we wanted to happy like them. It goes on and on.

The point is, you can't do it. You can't meet God's standard. That's why Paul said back in 2:16 that no one is "*justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus.*" You see, the Gospel is about what God has done for us and what God has done for us is centered in the cross. Look down at v.14, "*But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...*"

The word that Paul uses for boast isn't about bragging as we think of it; the idea is to glory in, trust in, revel in, rejoice in and live for. One writer says, "The object of our boast fills our horizons, engrosses our attention, and absorbs our time and energy." What we boast in is our obsession.

This begs the question, why boast in the cross? The cross in Paul's day was the most shameful of all objects. It wasn't a source of boasting, but of humiliation. The very word *cross* was considered unmentionable in polite Roman society. The closest equivalent today is the idea of a lynching. What would people think when

they heard the founder of Christianity was lynched as a low life criminal? Why would Paul boast in something as embarrassing as that? Here's why: Because the cross means that God loved us enough to send his only Son to die for us. Because the cross paid the redemption price for our salvation. Because the cross means we have forgiveness once and for all. Because the cross means God now accepts us as righteous in his sight. All of that is based on **his** work, not mine.

There are only two options: religion or the gospel. That's a choice between boasting in ourselves and our work and what we can do for God, or boasting in the cross of Jesus and what he's done for us.

Man-pleasing or God-pleasing?

There is a third contrast in these verses between religion and the gospel. It's a contrast between trying to please man or trying to please God.

Religion is all about trying to please man. In v.12 Paul says those who wanted the Galatians to be circumcised, "*desire to make a good showing in the flesh.*" Paul reveals their true motive, not to serve God but to impress men. In v.13 he says they want "*to boast in your flesh.*" Circumcision was performed on the flesh. It's like the more foreskins they collected, the more they could boast and the more impressed the people back in Jerusalem would be. I could just see them writing their missionary letters back home, "a hundred more foreskins!"

It's so easy for us to fall into this trap. It's very insidious. We start out with a real desire to obey God. With that desire we begin to do things like pray and read the Bible on a regular basis, we witness to our friends, we go to church, we tithe, we read Christian books, we stop drinking too much. All of this is encouraged and applauded by our fellow believers. All that's fine, but often what happens is we get pretty good at it. And as we get pretty good at it our fellow believers pat us on the back even more. They're impressed. All of that feeds a desire within us to be accepted and noticed and admired. Pretty soon, in a very subtle way, that becomes our focus. We take pride in our our disciplines, our spiritual accomplishments. The things we once did to please God become things we do to boost our reputation and ultimately to feed our own ego.

As part of this desire to make a good showing in the flesh, notice in v.12 he says they do all of this "*so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.*" By pleasing men they would avoid persecution that came with clinging to the cross. You see, the cross has a way on inviting persecution. Think about it. The cross says we're sinners. The cross says as sinners we're the objects of God's wrath. The cross tells us there is nothing we can do to save ourselves; we need someone to step in for us. These aren't real pleasant things to hear about ourselves. Every time we look at the cross we hear Christ say, "I'm here because of you.

It's your sin I'm dying for; your curse I'm suffering; your debt I'm paying; your death I'm dying." Nothing cuts us down to size like the cross. We all think far too much of ourselves until we visit a place called Calvary. It's there, at the foot of the cross, we shrink to our true size.

You see, a cross-centered life is focused on pleasing God, not man. When that's the ultimate desire, persecution can be expected. Paul confirms this down in v.17 when he says, "***From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.***" The word for brand-marks is the Greek word *stigmata*. Some people in church history took this to mean that if we contemplate the wounds of Christ enough, those wounds will miraculously appear on our body. But that's not what this means. The word was used back then for the branding of a slave. Paul is simply saying that his sufferings for Christ were his branding as a Christ-follower. In 2 Cor. 11 he says he was imprisoned, often in danger of death, five times he received from the Jews 39 lashes, three times he was beaten with rods, he was stoned, three times he was shipwrecked. That's what he's talking about here.

If you want to live a gospel-centered life and boast in the cross, you can expect that some people will be offended. You may not endure what Paul did, but some kind of persecution will come your way. If you stand for the cross, you may not make the team; you may not get the promotion; you may not get invited to the party; you may get the cold shoulder; you may get a C instead of the A you deserved; you may get labeled a fanatic or a narrow bigot or just plain ignorant. Whatever wounds of flesh or spirit you must endure, look at it this way, you bear on your body the brand-marks of Jesus!

Alive or dead to the world?

The fourth contrast has to do with our relationship with the world. We're either alive to the world or dead to the world. Religion is all about being alive to the world; the gospel is all about being dead to the world. By the way, did you notice there are three crucifixions in this passage? There is the cross of Christ, of course, but there is more. In v.14 he also says through the cross "***the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.***" So Christ has been crucified, the world has been crucified, and I've been crucified. That's three crucifixions.

When Paul speaks of "***the world***" in this passage, he means all of the values and pleasures and ambitions of this present age. To be alive to the world is the spirit of our age with all its emphasis on **me**. It's Sally Fields doing a commercial and saying, "I have this one body and this one life." That sounds real good and we should take care of our bodies but what she's really saying is, "This is all there is, so I better make the most of it!" To be alive to the world means your highest aspirations have to do with life on earth.

So when Paul says "***the world has been crucified to me,***" he's saying it has no hold on me. It's like a dead corpse; the values of

the world, the ambitions of the world, the glory of the world is powerless over me. But that's not all: I've also been crucified to the world. How is the believer dead to the world when he lives in the world, works a regular job, raises a family, takes vacations and has a retirement account? I heard a story about a young student who asked his pastor this same question. The pastor sent him out to the grave site of a friend with instructions to criticize the dead friend, harass him, and find fault, and then praise him with glowing terms and brag on him to excess.

Upon his return, the pastor asked, "What did your friend say when you criticized him?"

"Nothing" the student said.

"How did he react when you praised him?"

"It made no difference to him; he's dead!"

That's what it means to be dead to this world. Its applause means nothing and its hatred means nothing. We neither admire the people of this world nor do we fear them. The riches of this world and the honors of this world and the achievements of this world mean little or nothing.

Someone said, "Our greatest fear should not be of failure, but of succeeding at something that doesn't really matter." Let's be honest, this whole concept is an ideal that we have a hard time really living out. I've been wrestling with this verse all week. I have a long way to go to really be able to say this. I'm working on it, but I'm not there yet. The world and its glory is still far too attractive to me to be able to say with Paul, "the world is dead to me, and I'm dead to the world." But little by little, God finds ways to strip us of our attachment to this world, and as he does we see more of the richness there is in Christ.

National Israel or the Israel of God?

There is one more contrast between religion and the gospel I want you to see. The contrast is between national Israel and the Israel of God. In v.16 Paul says, "***And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.***" That term "***the Israel of God***" is intriguing. It reminds me of how in Gal. 3:7 he said, "***It is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.***" And in 3:29 he said, "***If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring.***" Remember, Abraham's offspring were the Jews. It seems that to Paul, believers in Jesus are now descendants of Abraham and the new Israel. That's what Paul means here by "***the Israel of God.***" It's also very interesting that the blessing he gives here of mercy and peace is a characteristic blessing from the Old Testament upon Israel. It's like Paul is saying, "If you want to stay with religion, you can get circumcised and become a Jew and become a part of National Israel. But if you simply put your trust in Christ and in Christ alone, you are part of the Israel of God and God's mercy and peace is yours to enjoy."

Conclusion

So those are five contrasts between religion and the gospel. Religion is about outward rituals; the gospel is about inward transformation. Religion is about what we can do for God; the gospel is about what God has done for us. Religion is about pleasing man; the gospel is about pleasing God at all cost. Religion is about being alive and attached to this world; the gospel is about being dead to the world. Religion is about national Israel; the gospel is about the Israel of God.

What Paul leaves us with is a choice. I believe that's what he means when he refers to those who *"walk by this rule."* The question is, will we do that? Will we steer our life according to the truth of the Gospel, or will we turn back towards religion? Paul says, "Okay, you've heard what I've said about religion and the gospel. Now, you need to choose to walk by this rule. You need to direct your life in such a way that it's consistent with the gospel rather than religion. And if you do that, you'll experience God's mercy and God's peace in your life."

The hard thing about this is it goes against the grain of everything we've learned. A while ago I was trying to fix something on my bike. I came to that one screw I had to get loose, and the more I worked to loosen that screw the tighter it seemed to get. Then

a friend came along and told me, "Oh, this has a left-handed thread. It's a reverse screw. You have to tighten or loosen it going in the opposite direction." It took me 40 years to find out how screws work, and now they change the rules.

There's a sense in which the gospel is a reverse screw. Everything in religion that seems right, in the gospel is wrong. The way to spiritual wealth is to acknowledge your spiritual poverty. The way to live is to die. The way to rule is to serve. And the way to be right with God is not to work for it; it's not to try harder to be good; it's not to get religion or clean up your act; it's to rest and trust in the work God has done for us through his Son. Unless you understand the reverse nature of that screw, you'll never get anywhere with God. The more you try to work it according to the values of religion, the tighter the screw gets and the further away you get from him. I know it's hard to change; you spent 40 years learning how to play the religious game, and now they change the rules. But that's the way it is. It's not about what you do, it's about what God in his grace has done.

So let me close this series on Galatians by giving you the same blessings Paul gave them in v.18, *"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen."*