

August 3, 2008

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Bearing the Brand Marks of Jesus

Galatians 6:11-18

In these final verses, Paul illustrates the profound yet practical implications of the gospel of Jesus Christ by contrasting the lives of those who say they embrace the gospel and those whose lives are actually impacted by the gospel. There are a lot of people who say that they are Christians – but the testimony of their lives does not bear out their claims. The truth is, the gospel will change you. You cannot believe the gospel without there being a significant and notable change in the way you live. The gospel will mark you – your life will bear the brand marks of Jesus – it won't be a mystery to the world who you serve.

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. Galatians 6:11

There are three outstanding characteristics that brand the lives of those who are enemies of the gospel of Jesus Christ. **The first is that they put all their effort into looking good on the outside with no corresponding change on the inside.** **Outward holiness – inward emptiness.** *Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised* Galatians 6:12a The Jews who were preaching you must be circumcised to be saved, Paul says, were doing it *to make a good showing in the flesh*. They were concerned with how they looked to the rest of the religious Jews. For them to boast that they had persuaded Jewish and Gentile Christians to return to the law would give them high praise among the Jewish community in Jerusalem. But the problem is that if all you have is a change on the outside without a corresponding change on the inside – nothing is different.

Back in the 1970's, there was a chimpanzee named Nim Chimpsky that was given, not long after he was born, to a family in New York City to raise right alongside their own children to see if he could learn American Sign Language as a human child might. They dressed him like a boy, he ate with the family, did human family stuff, and was treated in most respects as another one of their children. But after a couple of years, the project was ended because Nim never showed any signs of progressing beyond chimphood. At the end of the day – Nim was a chimp – not a boy – and all the clothes and the few hand signals he learned didn't change the fact of Nims birth. What he needed he'd never get through outward changes.

The second characteristic of those who are not genuine is that their lives reflect the pursuit of ways to avoid suffering. They avoid the cross and pursue comfort. *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.* Galatians 6:12b If you take up the cross and follow Jesus, there will be suffering – there will be persecution. *Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.* 2 Timothy 3:12 The ones who were preaching you must be circumcised, did it not only to look good, but also to avoid suffering and persecution. Another interesting side-note to this is that since circumcision was the sign of a Jew, it might just provide a way of escaping suffering when Christians began being persecuted for their faith.

If you all have been following the saga of a girl named Sara that my daughter Hilary has been living with and sharing life – you know that this is the biggest stumbling block to her surrender to Christ – persecution. She knows that to follow Christ is to pick up the cross of persecution – especially from her friends and family. There is for her the real and present possibility of losing both. Author and pastor Calvin Miller says he thinks the most vibrant missionaries he has met are medical doctors serving in lonely outposts of the Arab world. These physicians and nurses are aware that in winning a Muslim to Christ, they condemn their converts to ostracism and persecution—even martyrdom. One doctor said to him, "How do you think I feel in longing to lead people to Christ, knowing that the moment my patients receive Christ they face a life-and-death contempt in this culture?" "It must seem pointless," Miller replied. "Pointless?" the doctor said. **"This is the point of the gospel—the cost and consequence of receiving Christ is the entire point of 'Take up your cross and follow me.'"**

The cross of Christ is a great offense and stumbling block for people who are concerned for their own comfort. We see it reflected in appeals to people to come to faith on the basis of what Christ can do for you – how becoming a Christian can enhance your life – how things go better with God – and the result of that gospel is a bankrupt faith and a shipwrecked life when persecution and suffering for the sake of the gospel makes its appearance in their lives.

The third characteristic of those who are not genuine about the gospel is that they boast in what they have done. **They look for and cultivate the praise of men.** *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.* Galatians 6:13 It is the attitude of 'Look at me – look at my ministry – see how God is blessing me – look what I've done.' The cross of Christ is a great stumbling block for people who are proud, for those who look to men for affirmation, for those who cannot humble themselves before God and man. **The shocking effect of the cross is to strip us naked of all merit and reveal our desperate, hellish state and utter dependence on the mercy of God.** God's love for us was poured out through the crucified Christ – that is where we see what our sin truly deserves. And it is impossible to raise the flag of pride at the foot of the cross. That is where men jeered at Christ and spit on Him and reviled Him – and for men who like to boast in what they have done, the cross is a scandal and an offense.

Correspondingly, there are three outstanding characteristics that brand the lives of those who have embraced the gospel. **First, their only boast is in the cross of Jesus Christ.** *But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,* Galatians 6:14a Boasting in the cross is a lot like bragging about a hanging or raving about the electric chair. The cross means that someone's going to die. So what is there to boast in? What is there to brag about?

The boast is that the cross is the sign of victory. It is like the Superbowl Trophy – only the team that has won the Superbowl has the right to boast in the trophy. On the cross, Christ won the supreme victory over sin and death and hell – and in His dying, I died, and in His resurrection – I live. **What's not to boast about?!** Because of the cross I am victorious over everything this world stands for. Paul told the Corinthians: *If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.* 2 Corinthians 11:30 And nothing shows our weakness like the cross – but nothing shows His power and strength like the cross. **Because of the cross, slaves of the Fall are liberated – Satan's minions are bound and his works are destroyed – death is conquered – sin is demolished – the wrath of God is absorbed and fear is banished. Because of the cross of Christ, all who believe are conquered by grace and transferred out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of Light and the Empire of the Son.**

Secondly, those who have been conquered by grace do not run away from suffering but embrace it. *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.* Galatians 6:14b True followers of Christ understand that something significant and crucial is accomplished by suffering and even by dying. Because of the cross, the world has come to look like the despised, worthless, cursed thing that it is – *the world has been crucified to me.* And because of the cross I am despised by the world – *and I to the world.*

When Joseph Ton was a pastor in Romania he was arrested by the secret police for publishing a sermon calling for the churches to refuse to submit to the Communist government's demand for control over their ministries. When an official told him he must renounce his sermon, he replied, "No, sir! I won't do that!" The official, surprised that anyone would respond so forcefully to the secret police, said, "Aren't you aware that I can kill you?" "Sir, let me explain that to you," Ton said. **"You see, your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. . . . You know that my sermons are spread all over the country on tapes. When you kill me, I only sprinkle them with my blood. They will speak 10 times louder after that, because everybody will say, 'That preacher meant it because he sealed it with his blood.'** So go on, sir, kill me. When you kill me, I win..."

Third, their lives reflect the glory of God and they run from the adoration of men. *For neither is circumcision anything, nor un-circumcision, but a new creation.* Galatians 6:15 When Hugh Latimer, a fifteenth-century reformer, was preaching one day in the presence of King Henry VIII, he reports that he said to himself, **"Latimer! Latimer! Remember that the king is here; be careful what you say."** Then he said to himself, **"Latimer! Latimer! Remember that the King of kings is here; be careful what you do not say."** And for such unflinching faithfulness Latimer was eventually burned at the stake. But He feared failing God more than he feared offending men. Those truly converted by grace value their souls immeasurably more than they value their lives, and they will gladly sacrifice that which is only temporal and corruptible for the sake of that which is eternal and incorruptible. In 1555, after a lifetime of fearing God and not men, Hugh Latimer and Nicolas Ridley walked out of Bocardo prison to be burned at the stake for their unswerving devotion to the cause of Christ. As they approached the stack of tinder-dry wood, there to be bound, Latimer turned to his companion and said. **'Be of good cheer Ridley. Play the man! We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace as I trust shall never be put out!'**

And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

Galatians 6:16 Paul says that those whose lives bear these marks – literally, walk by the straight-edge of this rule – will be characterized by peace and mercy. It is that peace that comes from knowing you are on the winning side – the kind of peace that defies worldly comprehension and revels in the new mercies of God every morning.

And then Paul closes, as we shall, with this final word: *From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.* Galatians 6:17 Paul's life was characterized by a relentless, unswerving devotion to Christ – and his body was tattooed with the brand-marks of the cross. He used the word **stigmata**, which means a **mark** or a **brand** or a **tattoo**, and from the earliest civilizations even up to today, it has been used to tell a story and proclaim ownership. **One of the things he was saying was that his body was a living, illustrated book in which you could read the gospel.** Adonirum Judson, missionary to Burma, endured untold hardships trying to reach the lost for Christ. For seven heartbreaking years he suffered hunger and sickness, loss of wife and child, and extreme privation. At one point he was thrown into Ava Prison, and for nearly two years, he was subjected to almost incredible mistreatment. As a result, for the rest of his life he carried the ugly marks made by the 32 pounds of chains and iron shackles which had held him. Undaunted, upon his release he asked for permission to enter another province where he might resume preaching the Gospel. The godless ruler indignantly denied his request, saying, *"My people are not fools enough to listen to anything a missionary might SAY, but I fear they might be impressed by your SCARS and turn to your religion."* What is it that people read in us? Do we bear the brand-marks of the gospel?

The other thing Paul was saying was, 'If you have issues with what I am preaching – don't talk to me – take it up with Jesus. I belong to Him.' The way of the cross always leaves its mark, and **it is those marks that identify us as belonging to Jesus.** When we see Jesus – we will see a cross-scarred Savior – the wounds on His head from the crown of thorns, the wound in His side from the spear that pierced His heart, the wound in His hands and in His feet from the nails driven through His flesh into the cross. **And when we stand before Him, He will not look you over for medals, degrees, or diplomas, but for scars.** And the brand marks of Jesus will identify us as one of His.

Amy Carmichael, missionary to India for fifty-five years until her death in 1951, once replied to a friend who asked what it was like to serve Christ in missions. *"Missionary life is simply a chance to die"* she wrote. A chance to die to the world but live to God – a chance to die to self – but live for Christ – a chance to die to all that is temporal and fleeting and corruptible – and live for all that is eternal and incorruptible. A chance to live at the cross and bear the brand-marks of Jesus. One of the poems that Amy wrote goes like this:

Hast thou no scar?

No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?

I hear thee sung as mighty in the land,

I hear them hail thy bright ascendant star,

Hast thou no scar?

Hast thou no wound?

Yet I was wounded by the archers, spent,

Leaned Me against a tree to die; and rent

By ravening wolves that compassed me, I swooned:

Hast thou no wound?

No wound? no scar?

Yet, as the Master shall the servant be,

And pierced are the feet that follow Me;

But thine are whole: can he have followed far

Who hath no wound nor scar?

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen. Galatians 6:18 Paul concludes as he began – grace to you – the power of the limitless God to do in us what we could never do ourselves. As we come to the table this morning – let us examine ourselves to see if we do indeed bear the brand-marks of Jesus – does He reign supreme in our lives – do we indeed belong to Him – can the story of the cross be read in our lives?

Our gracious God and heavenly Father,

Your name is excellent- Your glory high, Your compassions unfailing, Your mercy tender and grace overflowing. We bless You for the invitation and promises of the gospel for in them is pardon for rebels, liberty for captives, health for the sick and salvation for the lost. Awaken our hearts to the truth that Christ bore all our anguish that we might be all joy – He was beaten as an enemy that we might be welcomed as friends – He surrendered to hell's worst that we might gain heaven's best – stripped that we might be clothed in righteous robes – wounded that we might be healed – endured darkness that we might have eternal light. May our every breath be highest praise – our every step buoyant with delight as we see our enemies crushed, Satan defeated, sin buried in the ocean of reconciling love, hell's gates closed, heavens portals opened. Grant that our lives would not be a shell of outward goodness but an inward reality of holiness. Let us never run from the suffering of the cross but with joy embrace all its goodness. May we be those whose only boast is in the cross of Christ and bear in our bodies the brand-marks of Jesus. May the gospel of grace be written large on us so that others might read the wonderful story of grace and be made glad in God, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto You.
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.***