

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 20 November 2011

No. T0703

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A Study of Galatians: Living by Faith - Galatians 6:1-18

Today we conclude our studies of Paul's letter to the Galatians with a talk on Galatians 6 entitled "Living by Faith". We'll divide the chapter into two parts:

1. Galatians 6:1-10: Living by Faith means sowing to the Spirit.
2. Galatians 6:12-17: Living by Faith means glorying in the Cross.

That leaves Galatians 6:11 and Galatians 6:18, which I'll comment on at the end.

Living by Faith means sowing to the Spirit

Galatians 6:1 reads: "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted". The spiritual are those who show the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit, described in Galatians 5:22. According to Galatians 5:23, this fruit can't be produced by Law-keeping - the Law only points out our shortcomings and condemns us. But the spiritual will have the right approach and attitude towards any person caught off-guard by a sin. In a spirit of gentleness tempered by self-judgment, they'll be able to assess the sin as God sees it; and so be neither too severe nor too lax. Our Saviour provides forgiveness by His blood and recovery through His priestly grace, which enables them to completely mend, or make good, the situation. This contrast, between what the Law cannot do and what the Saviour does, is aptly illustrated by the parable of the Good Samaritan. The injured and dying man had taken a wrong course of action in going down from Jerusalem, the city of the great King, to Jericho, the place of a curse. The Law, represented by the priest and the Levite, was unable to help. But the Samaritan had both the grace and the resources to restore the man to full health and strength. Spiritual people positively respond to the words of the Lord Jesus: "You go, and do likewise", see Luke 10:29-37. Paul himself is a good example of Galatians 6:1 in his restoration of Onesimus to Philemon.

After the specific 'meekness and gentleness of Christ' requirements of Galatians 6:1, Galatians 6:2 gives a more general exhortation: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ". The Christian pathway isn't easy. At times, all believers face testing and trials in which they encounter difficult or trying circumstances, here called heavy burdens. For some its adverse circumstances, a trying family life, hostility, or even persecution; and a whole host of problems such as failures or temptations. The demand of the 'law of Christ' is that we share in each other's burdens - help carry the load. The 'law of Christ' is that which ruled His life: love for God and accompanying care and concern for mankind. He said: "Come unto Me, all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest". (Matthew 11:28) He commanded His disciples: "that you love one another just as I have loved you". In the context of Galatians, this exhortation was necessary because they'd been hindered from obeying the truth. Paul was emphatic: it's only faith working through love that counts for anything. And we're to use the liberty into which Christ has called us to serve one another through love.

The reason for the exhortation of Galatians 6:2 is given in Galatians 6:3: "if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself". Now, I'd be the first to admit to tendencies of self-importance and self-comparisons but these are features of the flesh! Thankfully, such self-deception is cancelled out if there's proper continuous self-assessment: "Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to anybody else", Galatians 6:4 (New International Version). The idea of testing is to objectively approve one's own actions. The drift of Galatians 6:2-4 reaches a conclusion in Galatians 6:5: "For each will have to bear his own load". This directly contrasts with "bearing one another's burdens" in Galatians 6:2 and the two mustn't be confused. The load of Galatians 6:5 can be likened to a soldier's pack, which he alone was responsible for, and able to carry. As a believer I'm totally responsible for how I live; and I'm fully accountable to God for He has given me a 'backpack' that He knows I'm capable of bearing. We must remember Romans 14:12: "Every one of us shall give account of himself to God".

A precept of Christian love is introduced in Galatians 6:6 with its directive for practical fellowship: "One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches". The 'good things' are material things with which God has blessed us. They're described as useful; and they're to be shared with those who provide a spiritual ministry to the saints. The ideas of giving and of doing good are widened out in Galatians 6:9-10, and supplemented with a promise:

“let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith”. In today’s world there’s much need and many opportunities present themselves to us. But, as believers, we’re to give priority to the needs of the family of God. We’re to appreciate that whereas rewards may not be immediate, they’re certain! There’s always the need for patience and for perseverance.

Between the precept of Galatians 6:6 and its practice with promise found in Galatians 6:9-10 is the principle of God’s governmental standard for life in Galatians 6:7-9: “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life”. The ever-present danger for believers is to follow the promptings of the old sinful nature, the flesh, and to live self-centred lives. ‘Sowing to the flesh’ is essentially ignoring and sneering at God, because it was He who gave His verdict of it at the Cross - He crucified it as being both worthless and obnoxious to Himself. Galatians 6:7 says that it’s easy to be deceived, that is, led astray by the flesh - the Galatians had readily been duped: “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” In Galatians 5:19-21, Paul lists the awful outcomes of following the sinful desires of the flesh and warns that those who practise such terrible deeds do not inherit the kingdom of God. Yes, the ‘rule of the harvest’, that you get out of life what you put in, the cause and effect principle, applies to you and me - there’re consequences to our actions. Thankfully, every true believer has a new nature from God and there’s the possibility, urged upon us here, to sow to the Spirit and so reap the harvest of eternal life! According to Galatians 3:2-3, 5 and 14, we received the Spirit through faith by believing in Christ. Galatians 5:25 describes the believer’s position before God as ‘life through the Spirit’. And Galatians 5:5 says that through the Spirit we long for that state of righteousness, where sin is absent. But here and now, there’s never-ending warfare between the flesh and the Spirit: “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these things are opposed one to the other, that ye should not do those things which ye desire”, Galatians 5:17 (JN Darby Translation). Paul argues that if it’s true that we live by the Spirit, then we should also walk by the Spirit. When we’re led by the Spirit, we gain the victory and we do not gratify the desires of the flesh. If we keep in step with the Spirit, we’ll have fruit unto holiness now - plus the future reward of everlasting life.

Living by Faith means glorying in the Cross

In Galatians 6:12 Paul unveils the true motives of these false teachers or Judaizers: “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” (English Standard Version). The expression ‘the cross of Christ’ describes the entire doctrine that salvation was provided by means of Christ’s sacrifice for sin upon the Cross; and the principle that this salvation is bestowed by the grace of God and received by faith alone. The Judaizers didn’t have any genuine interest in the spiritual welfare of the Galatians. Rather, they ‘put on a good face’, so as to impress everyone with their detailed adherence to the traditions of Judaism. By purporting that circumcision of the flesh was a necessary part of being saved, they skilfully covered up their avoidance of the reproach of the cross. Paul then lays bare their hypocrisy: “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”, Galatians 6:13. Through blatant insincerity and pride, they were forcing circumcision upon the Galatians to publicly boast of religious following. Sadly, they also rubbished Paul’s preaching. But Paul himself had once campaigned for the very things they propagated and knew how wrong they were! With godly ire, he defends of the truth of the Gospel: “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world”, Galatians 6:14. Paul means that he would promote the cross as the one and only way of salvation. But to take such a stance involves ridicule, shame and scoffing, especially from the religious world, who think that their schemes (in this instance, Jewish circumcision rites) enable their adherents to achieve salvation by their own human efforts. Paul dismisses all such notions: “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation”, Galatians 6:15. Yes, it’s the word of the cross that pronounces death upon sinful man with all his religious efforts; and the Gospel provides new life from the risen Christ!

But I return to Galatians 6:14: “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”. I ask myself the question: do I think the Cross is this important - the only message I’d boast about? In 1 Corinthians 1:23, Paul says its message presents a huge stumbling block to religious people (like the Jews); and that it’s utter foolishness to unbelieving intellectuals, the worldly-wise. “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). Paul had come to appreciate the Cross as the greatest expression of the Saviour’s grace: “The Son of God loved me and gave Himself [over to death on a cross] for me”, Galatians 2:20. Isaac Watt’s hymn invites us to:

*“See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down”.*

It asks the question:

*“Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?”*

It continues with the only adequate response:

*“Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all”.*

Paul says that the Cross brought practical consequences too - by it the world had been crucified to him, and he to the world. The world is that system of life developed by mankind in all its rebellion. It's both anti-God and anti-Christ. It's energised by Satan and sustained by the ungodly. You'll remember that over the Cross Pilate placed a notice "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews", written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin (see John 19:19-20). I've often thought that the entire known world of Jesus' time would have been able to read this inscription. For us today, 'Hebrew' would represent the religious world; 'Greek' the world of advanced civilisation, education and technology; 'Latin' the world of politics, government and power. For Paul it was primarily the world of the Jewish religion. He'd excelled in all aspects of it and his success gave him utmost confidence in the flesh. But that world was now completely finished for him. That is, in Christ's cross the world had also crucified Paul. Conversely, it was now dead to him by that same cross. Evidently in Galatians 6:14 there's a play on the two senses of the Greek verb to crucify, which can either mean to erect a fence or to crucify. So the cross of Christ forms a permanent barrier between the world and me; and between me and the world. Isaac Watt's hymn starts in this vein:

*“When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the cross of Christ my God:
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.”*

Galatians 6:16 introduces the principle that those who live by faith accept that all blessings come through the Cross and are realised in new creation: "as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God". By the 'Israel of God' Paul means all Israelites, past, present and future, who exercise faith in the Messiah of God (those in this present day of grace are incorporated into the Church). The words 'peace and mercy be upon them' probably echo the final sentiments of Psalm 125:5 and Psalm 128:6 "Peace be upon Israel!"

Paul concludes with strong words: "From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus", Galatians 6:17. He uses his apostolic authority to silence the false teachers and to stop their practices. He points to the evidences of his sufferings for the Gospel, to marks etched on his body. He calls these "the marks of Jesus", the lowly rejected, despised One whose servant he was. In Paul's day, masters branded their slaves with a hot iron to indicate to whom they belonged. Paul had literally been branded from the persecutions, floggings, stonings, etc. he'd received from preaching of the Gospel of Christ.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I refer to Galatians 6:11: "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand". Unusually, Paul had written the letter himself because he wanted the Galatians to realise the seriousness of their entrapment: "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace", Galatians 5:4. But he also wanted to reassert the true Gospel and to express his deep fatherly concern for them: "my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!" Galatians 4:19. Then he signs off his letter: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen", Galatians 6:18.

I now highlight the importance of the Cross in Galatians to summarise this series. There's been much emphasis placed upon the Cross and the authentic Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ:

1. So vividly had Paul preached the Cross amongst the Galatians that he claimed: "It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified"! (Galatians 3:1)

2. Today, I said that the Cross means the end of me and all that I am as a fallen human being: "I 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", Galatians 2:20
3. The Cross also rescues me from all my shortcomings with respect to the Law: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is **hanged on a tree**' - so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith", Galatians 3:13-14.
4. The Cross carries with it a stigma. Galatians 5:11 states that the message of the Cross is utterly offensive to a sinful world and results in persecution of all preachers of its doctrine.
5. Galatians 5:24 says that, as part of my belief in Christ for salvation, I actually concurred with God's verdict given at the Cross: "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires".
6. As we have just seen in Galatians 6:14, the Cross is the world's estimate of both Christ and His followers. He and they are deemed unsuitable for its advancement. Death by crucifixion was reserved for the worthless of society, those, it deemed, it was better off without.
7. But, we discover God designed the Gospel so that through the Cross we might live apart from the world: "the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins to deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen", Galatians 1:4-5.

A few years ago I attended a Christian service in an old people's home in Harrogate. When we sang the hymn "*The Old Rugged Cross*", one person began to weep. I have since reflected on his weeping:

- Was it pure emotion? - It's a very moving hymn.
- Was it regret? - Had he neglected to accept these truths of the Gospel despite many opportunities during his lifetime?
- Was it remorse? - Had the Gospel message finally moved him to bitter repentance, even at the eleventh hour?
- Was it adoration? - Had a fresh appreciation of the Saviour caused tears of joy to flow?

Let's renew our commitment to Christ and His cross as a result of our studies of Galatians:

*Oh, that old rugged cross, so despised by the world,
Has a wondrous attraction for me;
For the dear Lamb of God left His glory above
To bear it to dark Calvary.*

*To the old rugged cross I will ever be true,
Its shame and reproach gladly bear;
Then He'll call me some day to His home far away,
Where His glory forever I'll share.*

*So I'll cherish the old rugged cross
Till my trophies at last I'll lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross
And exchange it some day for a crown.*

George Bennard 1873-1958

Amen!

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