

The Epistle to the Galatians: The Gospel of Grace

Lesson 20: Glorifying in the Flesh (6:11-13)

“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.”

Phil Ryken took me to the scene where the Galatians first read this letter, and I thought it would be good if he took you there too, *“It must have been a dramatic moment—the world premiere of an epistle. The Galatian church had gathered for the public reading of a letter from none other than the apostle Paul. As the letter drew to a close, they heard these words: “See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand” (Gal. 6:11). Perhaps, for emphasis, the reader held up the papyrus to show everyone the large-print portion of Paul’s letter. What had probably happened was this: According to his usual custom (e.g., Rom. 16:22), Paul had dictated most of this epistle to his amanuensis, or secretary. But he finished the document in his own handwriting, personally adding his autograph in order to give his letter to the Galatians the stamp of his apostolic authority. And he wrote his signature in large letters to underscore his conclusion.”*¹

We know that Paul used an amanuensis to write his letters. Phil Ryken just referenced Romans 16:22, where Tertius takes the credit for penning Paul’s words. It was customary however, for Paul to finish a letter with a final benediction in his own handwriting, see 1 Cor. 16:21, Col. 4:18, and 2 Thess. 3:17.

We can’t say for sure if that’s what Paul means when he speaks of writing with large letters. Some commentators think that Paul is writing in large print because he has poor eyesight. Others have suggested that Paul is using Greek uncials, which were large, unconnected block letters. Greek uncials were used primarily for public notices because they were big and easy to see. A professional scribe often wrote in cursive writing because of its attractiveness, but also because more words could be fit in tighter spaces. It was also economical to write in cursive too, because papyrus was expensive, so expensive in fact that many times the text was erased and the papyrus was used again. It’s been offered that perhaps Paul was using a pictorial analogy to show the Galatians that he was more concerned with writing the truth with great clarity for all to see, regardless of how uneconomical it was, than to present a polished (but false) message like the Judaizers.

John MacArthur hypothesizes, *“Paul may have used the somewhat unsightly lettering as a statement, saying, in effect, “Because of my poor eyesight, you know how hard it is for me to write by my own hand, but what I have to say is so important and urgent that I want you to have this letter in your hands as soon as possible, with as bold lettering as possible. Unlike the Judaizers, I have never tried to impress you with my scholarship, personal skills, or superficial formalities. When I first came to you, you accepted my message with gladness, although my bodily presence was unattractive. This epistle is not written attractive, either, but I hope you will receive its message with the same urgency with which it is sent.”*²

¹ Phil Ryken, *Reformed Expository Commentary: Galatians* P&R Publishing p.269

² John MacArthur, *Commentary: Galatians* Moody p.195

We can take the thoughts of Ryken and MacArthur, and use them to form an opinion that aligns as best as we can reason with the surrounding scripture. We have the responsibility of always interpreting verses within context. So the first thing we need to remember, is to connect Paul's inclusion of writing with large letters, with what he has just said concerning doing good to everyone, especially those in the church, and what he's about to say in his final warning. Here we will read Paul's final warning to the Galatians to trust the gospel, to trust in Christ alone for full and free salvation. Paul has been trying to convince them that true religion is the matter of a changed heart that loves God, and lives to please Him, and not cold, dry, rote obedience to the law. Christianity, the new life of a Spirit-indwelt believer in Christ, has substance! The Spirit has made an impact, a lasting change in the believer, and therefore that believer will make an impact, a lasting change on whoever it influences. The Spirit breathes new life, surgically removing a dead heart and replacing it with a heart of flesh. The Judaizers were reintroducing to these new believers in Christ, the old religion of superficial obedience, teaching that justification with God came with the necessary act of circumcision. So Paul warns one last time to conclude this letter, warning against listening to the Judaizers, **"those who want to make a good showing in the flesh"** (v.12).

The first motive of the Judaizers was their religious pride. They weren't interested in pleasing God in their heart, they were concerned about playing the man and looking great in the eyes of men. Jesus gave much warning concerning a religion like this in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 6:1, **"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."** And in reference to giving in secret Jesus said, verse 2, **"Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward."** And in reference to taking religious pride in long and extravagant prayers, Jesus said in verse 5, **"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward."** In reference to fasting, Jesus said in verse 16, **"And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward."** Then, in the book of Luke, Jesus said to the Pharisees in 16:15, **"You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."**

These Judaizers brought their religious pride along with them, as they taught the necessity to obey the law for justification. Paul warned against those who super-impose the law, or any other teaching over the gospel for justification before God. He warned in Colossians 2:8, **"See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ."** Then he continues in verses 20-23, **"If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—"Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch (Get Circumcised) (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh."**

Regardless of the claim to be obedient to God, regardless if it's a religious act done in the name of Christ, if anyone is teaching anything that promotes religious accomplishment resulting in a reward of salvation, it is a false gospel. There is no sacrament that can substitute or add to the finished work of

Christ alone. There is no food to be consumed, or food to avoid consumption, that justifies us before God. And there is not enough body parts for us to cut (circumcision) that will earn us a right standing before God.

The second motive of the Judaizers was to avoid the persecution of the cross. The Judaizers were men who associated with the members of the church, but who refused to associate with the cross. They recognized Jesus as Messiah, and they pledged allegiance to Him, but they wouldn't accept His work in the cross on their behalf. They wanted Jesus, the Lion from the tribe of Judah, who would rise Jerusalem to the top, and when they saw Jesus the Lamb, they rejected Him. They needed a Messiah because they needed military and political strength, what they didn't need was help in the holiness department, with that they were just fine. For a Jew to come to Christ, and accept His finished work on the cross, would have brought much persecution. They would have faced serious social persecution, and even financial ruin. And so, in an attempt to blend the old with the new, and appease the Jews and the Greeks, the Judaizers avoid persecution by avoiding Christ's substitutionary atonement, and seek justification through the law.

Have you ever thought about how the substitutionary atonement of Christ brings about persecution? Why would anyone ever object to the greatest news in the world? God has prepared a way for sinners to be justified, at no cost to them, purely by His grace! Why would anyone object to that? Why would anyone reject that news, and resolve to figure out the way to do it themselves? But this is how sin dominates the heart. The sinful heart manifests itself in people who are very liberally-minded. These are the people who see the greatest good in all people, who believe that the problems in our world can be corrected if we educate people and motivate them properly. When a liberally-minded person hears the gospel proclaim that the only way that a person can be saved is through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ on the cross, they are immediately offended! How dare anyone claim that every person be wicked, and that this Jesus be our only hope! Then we see sin manifest itself in the conservatively-minded person. The conservatively-minded person sees how the world is filled with "good" and "bad" people, of which they consider themselves to be "good". When they are confronted with the gospel, and hear how all people are categorically in the "bad" and "dead in sin" group, they are insulted! How dare anyone claim that my life be valued the same as that villain over there! I've worked hard to achieve what I have! I have provided well for those that I love! I have been very generous with my wealth! How dare you tell me that I need this Jesus as much as a murderer does!

Whether you're liberally or conservatively minded, the gospel (outside of the work of the Spirit in the heart) offends. But it doesn't stop at offense. Offense quickly turns to anger, which leads to mocking, threatening, violence, persecution, and sometimes death. Wherever the gospel has been clearly articulated, and stuck too, persecution has followed to varying degrees. That's the motive behind the Judaizers attempt to reject the gospel and promote circumcision instead. What the Judaizers wanted most was the approval of men. Sure, they thought they were serving God, but what they really wanted to do was serve God and keep men happy with them, so they sought a religious system that avoided offending men, and they clung to a religious system where they could **"boast in your flesh"**.

The heart of the matter of religion is really the matter of your heart. Where is your heart at? What you boast in reveals what you worship. Do you boast in the God who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light? Or do you boast in your obedience to the law of God? It's not even a matter of taking, or leaving the cross of Christ. There are many who try and take some of the cross, as though they only

needed some of it to top off their shortcomings. Whether you feel like you need 80% or 50% or 10% of the redemptive work of Christ for your sin, the result is that you're religion is one where you are your own partial saviour. A gospel short of Jesus paying it all is no gospel whatsoever. Yet this is the religion that many who call themselves Christians believe. It is staggering how many professed believers in Christ have never heard the gospel before.

LifeWay Research conducted a study in the US in 2014 and 2016, where they interviewed 3,000 citizens across the country. Listen to the results:

- The majority agreed that Jesus died on the cross for sin and that he rose from the dead. (*Good start*)
- 69% of them disagree that the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation—and 58% strongly disagree with that.
- 58% said that worshiping alone is just as valid as worshiping in a church setting.
- 59% believed that the Holy Spirit was a power, but not a person.
- 60% believed that religious belief is a matter of personal opinion and not about objective truth.
- 52% said that people are basically good
- 51% believed that God accepts all religions equally
- 78% believe that Jesus is the greatest of God's creation

So how do you reach a people who think this way (both in and out of churches)? By insulting them with an offensive message? Or by giving them an easy religion that ensures their success, while not offending them, or requiring them to change in any way. People are always drawn to the message that allows them to do it themselves, so they can boast in what they've done. The only way to overcome a sin nature that would be inclined to offense at this message, is to preach the gospel anyways, and allow the God of the gospel to transform their heart.

When the gospel is preached, and understood properly, the 'boasting' is exclusively and only in the God of their salvation. What we find our identity in, what we see ourselves as, what gives us dignity and significance in life, this is what we boast in. And it will either be in God, or in ourselves.

Verse 13, "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."

Along with their pride, and their cowardice, the third motive for the Judaizers was their hypocrisy. This ties closely with the last point. The only reason that people pretend to be people that they're not, is because they're afraid of what people will think of them. Here we have the hypocritical Judaizers, preaching the necessity and importance of keeping the law, and yet Paul points out the obvious truth that they're not even keeping the law themselves! So, not only were they perverting the gospel and preaching a faux-Christianity, they weren't even doing a great job at being a Jew. They concerned themselves on the importance of circumcision, and failed many other points of the same law they uplifted.

As hypocrites, their main goal was the applause of men. What they really wanted was for others to recognize their religiosity, and more than that, to recognize how impactful they were in bringing others along in religion. They sought the respect and admiration of not only those who followed them, but also those who ranked above them in their religious circles. What the Judaizers teach us so clearly is that is

possible to be active in a church, and yet be far from a heart that is right with God. This isn't the first time in the scriptures that we've seen those in religious circles who had a message that they hypocritically didn't live up to. In Matthew 23:1-4 we read, **"Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.'"**

The Pharisees were hypocritical, just like the Judaizers are in our text at hand. They figuratively tied a thousand pounds around the necks of the people. They constantly added the pressure to follow law after law (613 to be exact), but more than that they added the many traditions to follows, and the keeping of all the religious ceremonies. While the purpose of God's law was always to condemn us, this wasn't the message of the Pharisees. Their message was salvation through law-keeping, and the weight of the load they asked to carry was too much. The average Jew likely didn't know, or couldn't even remember half of what they were demanded to carry by the Pharisees. It truly was a 'gospel-lost' opportunity. The Jews felt overburdened by the Pharisees, all hope was lost when they realized they couldn't meet the demands of the law. At the point when the good news of Christ ought to have been heralded, the message of "Try harder" shouted instead. But it's not as though the Pharisees were keeping the law either, it was all a sham. To the average Jew, the Pharisees were the perfect standard of righteousness. But to God, who sees the heart and knows all things, they were hypocrites. Jesus continues in Matthew 23:5-7, **"They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others."**

God saw right through the Pharisees, they had the sinful motive of glorying in their flesh, and we have the same situation with the Judaizers in the book of Galatians. God always hates pride. And God especially hates pride when it's religious people lording a false-righteousness over the masses, and keeping those under their influence out of the kingdom by not preaching the gospel. God is never interested in a people who love Him superficially for all sorts of hidden motives. God is never glorified, nor is He bound to bless those who 'serve' in a church setting, yet really glory only in their own flesh.

What are you glorying in?

*"Ultimately, Paul says, the heart of your religion is what you boast in. What, at bottom, is the reason you think you are in a right relationship with God? If the cross is just a help, but you have to complete your salvation with good works, it is really your works that make the difference between your being headed for heaven or not headed for heaven. But if you understand the gospel, you (glory) exclusively and only in the cross. Our identity, our self-image, is based on what gives us a sense of dignity and significance—what we glory in. Religion leads us to boast in something about us. The gospel leads us to boast in the cross of Jesus. I am saved solely and wholly because of Christ's work, not mine. He has reserved a place in heaven for me, given freely to me by Him. I "never glory"—I take no credit for me standing with God—"except in the cross"; what Christ has done is now something I "glory" in. To glory is to joyously exult, and to have high confidence in something. To know you are saved by Christ's work alone brings a joyous "glorying" confidence; not a self-confidence, but Christ-confidence."*³

³ Tim Keller, *Galatians for You* TGB Company, p.181-182