**Free to Boast**

Well, we are coming to the end of this letter that Paul wrote by the Holy Spirit to the churches in Galatia. I am still amazed how God uses our unique personalities to accomplish His Will. And God uses Paul’s rather harsh language in this letter to correct a big mistake that was taking hold in the churches there. Sometimes compromise is not the answer. The most loving thing you can do on some occasions is to say, “You’re going the wrong way! Stop! Turn around and come this way.” And that is exactly what Paul does here in this letter.

Some Jewish believers had joined the community of faith that Paul and Barnabas had started and they were telling the Greek believers that they had to first become a Jew by being circumcised in order to be ‘fully’ saved. They were adding something to the Good News that Christ died for our sins and Paul says, Christ plus anything else isn’t good news any longer because now you’re bound to follow the full law and it’s impossible. You can’t be made righteous by following the law because you won’t be able to do it perfectly.

The Jews had finally been set free from the Law by the cross of Christ and now some people wanted to go back to it. And Paul is speechless. Why in the world would anyone want to do that? **<Arrow>**

*‘You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh (or human effort)?*

And he goes on say that the purpose of the law was to lead us to Christ because the law reveals our sinfulness and our need for Christ. And he says, anyway, you are already a part of the family of God through Christ, not circumcision. **<Arrow>**

*So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise*

And we talked one Sunday about our adoption into the God’s family and how that is now our primary identity, we have a new Father and new brothers and sisters in Christ. We have been baptized into Christ and that changes our identity for good. We get a new birth certificate with God as our Father and Heaven as our home.

The Holy Spirit also takes up residence in our lives and it is our source of strength to live in freedom from the desires of our sinful nature. **<Arrow>**

*So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.*

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*

The focus is not on the law or on avoiding sin, but on keeping in step or walking with the Spirit. When we are doing that and following God’s leading in our lives, then sin is not so interesting to us any longer because we know something so much better, the pleasure of following the Father’s Will. Jesus was the perfect example of that for us; being obedient even to the Cross.

These are some great truths for us today and Paul now takes the quill from his scribe and he records his final thoughts here in chapter 6. **<Arrow>**

*Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh*

And he gives a final warning to the church to not listen to these men who are promoting circumcision. They are trying to avoid the criticism and persecution in the society. If you remember from Acts, before the Roman Empire persecuted Christians, it was the Jews who persecuted the Christians first and Paul was one of them before his conversion to Christ. So, these persons want to avoid the criticism and persecution by the Jews of the day, so they want to compromise and try to fit in and make Christianity more acceptable to the Jews.

We don’t have any persecution of the church here in the West, but I sure recognize this attempt to compromise and fit in with the dominant society viewpoints. It’s not due so much due to persecution, but more to avoid criticism and to get more people in the church since many of the churches here in Sweden are dying. Unfortunately, that strategy isn’t working. Or maybe I should say fortunately.

Throughout church history, there have been two types of errors that have plagued the church. One has been legalism: which is trying to live by a long list of do’s and don’ts that you earn God’s favor with. The other problem was license or lawlessness, which says we are saved by Christ (true), so it doesn’t matter how we live on earth, indulge your sinful desires and then pull out the get out of Jail card right at the end of your life. The Bible says that view is false. And we have read here in chapter 5 that people who base their lives on acts of the sinful nature are trying to find their happiness and security in these things and not in God. It reflects what is in their hearts and it is not the Spirit of Christ and we know without the Spirit of Christ, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

So, we need to find this right balance in church and not boast in either of these errors. Look at Paul’s reminder here in what we can boast in. **<Arrow>**

*May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*

The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; that is the only thing we can boast in. Not in our own good works and not in our freedom to sin. We can boast in the Cross of Christ. And it is fitting to end here as we enter the Holy Week where we remember Jesus’ last week on earth where He was crucified on the Cross and rose again from the dead on Sunday.

Now this may sound strange, but why boast in a form of execution? It was a painful and shameful way that criminals were executed with. Not something that most people go around boasting about, but Paul does and he’s tried to explain to us why this Good News or the Gospel message is so great.

And this made me think of the handout that I prepared for one of our discussion Sundays. I think it could be good to go through this again and to understand a little better why Paul boasted in the Cross. **<Arrow>**

Paul grew up with religion, he knew it well and he did his absolute best to make it work, but it won’t ever satisfy because it is dependent on you. The Good News is that you can depend on Christ, so let’s just read through these statements and remember why the Gospel is superior to religion.

And before we begin, just to be sure that everyone understands what we mean by the Gospel. It is the Good News that we don’t have to pay the penalty for our sins, our wrong deeds that have hurt others; we don’t have to pay the penalty for those sins ourselves. Remember, God is Holy and Perfect and Just. He just can’t say, oh well, don’t worry about it. His Justice demands that evil is dealt with and since none of us are perfect, we have this sin problem in front of a Holy God. And you can pay the penalty yourself, but you don’t want to do that. It’s a bad idea and you don’t have to. God doesn’t want to punish us; He wants a relationship with us, so He came to earth in human flesh as a Man in Jesus Christ and He lived a sinless life, demonstrating who He was and God paid the penalty of our sins on the body of Jesus Christ as he died on the Cross. And when we put our faith in Jesus Christ, our sins and their penalties have been paid for once and for all. And now, we are a new creation. We are adopted into the family of God through Christ. And God accepts us as He has accepted Christ who was without sin. So, it’s Good News for our eternal destiny, but it’s also Good News for our life here on earth right now and this comparison gives us a sense as to why Paul says, nothing else matters compared to this. Let’s take a look.

Religion says I obey; therefore I'm accepted. My motivation is based on fear & insecurity. While the Gospels says I'm accepted; therefore I obey. My motivation is instead based on grateful joy for what Christ has done for me.

Religion says I obey God in order to get things from God. When circumstances in my life go wrong, I am angry at God or myself, since I believe that anyone who is good deserves a comfortable life and that is my goal. The Gospel says I obey God to get God - to delight and resemble my Father. When circumstances in my life go wrong, I struggle, but I know that while God may allow this for my training, he will exercise His fatherly love within my trial.

With religion, when I am criticized, I am furious or devastated because it is essential for me to think of myself as a 'good person.' Threats to that self-image must be destroyed at all costs. However, with the Gospel, when I am criticized, I struggle, but it is not essential for me to think of myself as a 'good person.' My identity is not built on my performance, but on God's love for me in Christ.

In religion, my prayer life consists largely of petition and only heats up when I am in need. My main purpose in prayer is to control circumstances. Here’s the master plan God, now follow it. While in the Gospel, my prayer life consists of generous stretches of praise and adoration. My main purpose is fellowship with him to get in step with His Spirit. **<Arrow>**

With religion, my self-view swings between two poles. If and when I am living up to my standards, I feel confident, but then I am prone to be proud and unsympathetic to people who fail. If and when I am not living up to standards, I feel humble but not confident - I feel like a failure. In contract, with the Gospel, my self-view is not based on a view of myself as a moral achiever. In Christ I am at once sinful and lost, yet accepted. I am so bad He had to die for me, and so loved He was glad to die for me. This leads me to deeper humility as well as deeper confidence in God's love.

Final, in religion, ince I look to my pedigree or performance for my spiritual acceptability, my heart manufactures idols - talents, moral record, personal discipline, social status, etc. I absolutely have to have them, so they are my main hope, meaning, happiness, security, and significance, whatever I say I believe about God. In contrast with the Gospel, I have many good things in my life - family, work, school, sports, etc, but none of these good things are ultimate things to me. I don't absolutely have to have them, so there is a limit to how much anxiety, bitterness, and despair they can inflict on me when they are threatened or lost.

Are you beginning to see how wonderful, how fantastic the Gospel really is? It is the only thing we need in this life and in the life to come. It gives us the kind of solid foundation that we can base all our relationships on around us. And all this comes from the cross. We wouldn’t have any of this without Jesus’ death on the cross. So, if you want to boast in anything, boast in that. And if you want to praise God for anything, praise Him for that.

Now, if you find yourself more in that left hand ‘religion’ column then in the Gospel column, it’s OK. Just don’t stay there! Today is the day where you can choose to be identified with Christ and not base your life on a religion of your own good works. You can say to God that you don’t want to boast in your flesh any longer, but instead you want to boast in the Cross and Jesus’ finished work there. You can have that security today, if you simply ask for it, but do it in humility knowing that you mess up a lot and need God’s help. Jesus stands at the door to our hearts and He knocks, but He won’t break down the door. You need to answer His Call and open the door and invite Him into your life. And if you haven’t done that before, you can do it this morning. And if you need to repent from a life based on religion and begin to boast in the cross, you can do that this morning. God is waiting. God hears. And God forgives. Come to Him.

Let’s Pray.

Galatians 6:11-18

11 See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!

12 Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. 13 Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh. 14 May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. 15 Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. 16 Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God.

17 From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.