

Sermon: The Cross and Persecution

Text: Galatians 5:11; 6:12

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Introduction: Can you imagine for a moment what Saul of Tarsus went through on the road to Damascus? Luke tells us three separate times in the book of Acts of this life-changing encounter with God. Everywhere Paul went I am sure he spoke of his conversion and conversation with the risen Christ.

Acts 9:1-6 (NIV) ¹Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

After being taught, prayed for, baptized and taught some more and even changing his name, under the direction and call of God, Paul begins his ministry with the very people who he had previously tried to have punished.

How do you respond to new information that challenges what you have always thought to be true? Paul was converted; others now wanted to punish Paul. He was a traitor in their eyes. It is usually much easier to be in a group where there is no opposition from the outside, but sometimes people on the inside have significant differences in the way they believe.

It may be fairly easy to determine what you are willing to live for, but the question may also be: for what are you willing to die?

Galatians 5:11 (NIV) ¹¹Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished.

I. Paul Was Accused of Duplicity. i.e. being two-faced...

Illus. There is nothing more disingenuous than people who act one way with you and the opposite way when they are not. You know them: people who are kind to you, but talk poorly about you when they are in the company of others.

A. His persecutors said Paul agreed with *them*.

There's nothing like name dropping to bring instant credibility. This is a little like the children's game we have all played.

“Dad said, (you see, instant credibility) that it was OK to go to the dance and stay out to 2 AM. Mom, it's up to you.” You fill in the activity; we've all either heard this or been an actor in that drama.

Here in our story it appears that the Jewish instigators in the Galatian churches were claiming that circumcision was a requirement for salvation. It also seems they were using the Apostle's credentials for their own devices - intentionally deceiving people who were trying to develop a serious relationship with God.

What Paul had really said was:

Galatians 5:6 (NIV) “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

We have all certainly been given credit for saying or doing things that we would never do or say.

B. Paul assures them that (the charge) is impossible.

Paul's message does not change with his audience. Anyone who knew Paul had to realize that He preached salvation based on the work of the cross by Christ. Salvation could never be earned. It was by grace alone that we can come into a right relationship with God.

Paul had opened this epistle to the churches with these comments:

Galatians 1:6-7 (NIV) “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.

Paul's message of the cross and Christ crucified for the sins of the world continues to be his only message for salvation. He understands that the cross is seen as a scandal by the Jews. It is an offensive word that declares the Messiah to be cursed by God in this way, but Paul insists that is exactly what happened.

Some words are difficult both to say and hear, but need to be spoken. Out of love and concern for all people:

II. Paul Warns against Compromise.

Galatians 6:12 (NIV) ¹²Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.

They are simply wanting:

A. To please others

I like what John Stott says, All Christian preachers have to make a decision: “Either we preach that human beings are rebels against God, under his just punishment and (if left to themselves) lost, and that Christ crucified who bore their sin and curse is the only available Saviour. Or we emphasize human potential and human ability, with Christ brought in only to boost them, and with no necessity for the cross except to exhibit God’s love and so inspire us to greater endeavor.”

-The Cross of Christ, p. 347

Integrity in anything must be established first *before* there is a decision or crisis with which to deal.

Craddock Stories, p. 141 - When I taught in Oklahoma, there was a man that was concerned about improving the quality of preaching in the churches. Well, aren’t we all? But he had a lot of money, and the president of our little school--we were hanging by our financial fingernails--said, “I believe he’s going to give some money for the preaching program. “Well, I taught preaching. He said, “I’d like for you to go with me to talk to him.” We made several visits; they call it cultivation. The guy had a lot of money. Finally, the president called me and said, “He’s going to make a gift, a sizable gift. You want to go along?”

“Oh yeah, I’d love to be there.” Well, I went with the president; we went by car. Drove over there to the man’s office. He was ready for us. Had stuff out on his desk.

He said, “Before we finish this, I think we ought to pray.”

Oh yeah, I had a prayer; but we didn’t pray, and the president didn’t pray. The man prayed himself. He had the money, he had the prayer, he had the whole thing. He had the prayer. “Amen.”

“Amen.” He took his pen and started to sign his name. The lawyer apparently had fixed everything out, we’re talking big gift here. He took his pen, and just before he put his name down he looked up and said, “Now, this all goes for the preaching program?”

“Yes sir, that’s what it goes for.”

He started to write. He said, “Now you do understand, none of this goes for women or blacks?”

The president stood up, I stood up, and the president said, “I’m sorry, we cannot accept your money under those conditions.” We started to leave.

The man said, “Well, there are plenty of schools that will.”

I wanted to stay and talk about it a little bit, but it was all over. We were silent all the way home. The man had given to schools and churches over sixty million dollars, but not a penny is to go to the women or the blacks, you understand?

It has been my experience that when ever money, sex or power enter the equation, people’s true morals and ethics are discovered. *Paul warns against compromise:*

B. To avoid persecution

You see, if Paul or anyone would just “go along to get along,” things would work out.

It might be possible that those preaching “circumcision” wanted to avoid trouble with the Roman government because the Jewish faith was a recognized and accepted religion. And circumcision was an identifying mark of Judaism.

To require circumcision may have also been thought to possibly alleviate some of the antagonism between Jews and Christians.

You can see it today. There are very few beliefs that people will not give up with enough pressure or smooth talk.

Illus. (Mount Pleasant Christian Church in Greenville, NC.) Because I followed the directives of the elders there, one family with money got upset and said we are not going to give another cent to the church until the preacher is gone. The congregation voted to retain me, but the family insisted on their way. With giving declining, and operational money running out, a decision to avoid trouble was made. It was the practical thing to do, so I was formally ask to leave.

It is always easier to look good than to be good. An outward act does not create a clean heart. Rituals have never been what God wanted or demands.

Throughout this book of Galatians Paul is discussing divergent teaching of how to be saved. There seem to be:

III. Two Proposed Ways to Salvation

A. Man's efforts

The opening part of **6:12** goes to the heart of it. ¹² “Those who want to make a good impression outwardly” says a great deal about man’s pride.

Most days we would rather do it ourselves than depend on anyone else.

Most days we would rather earn what we receive.

Most days we like to believe we control our own destiny.

From the mistake in the garden, to the tower of Babel, to Moses’ mistake in providing water for the Israelites, to the Pharisees of Jesus’ time - man has tried to be equal with God and provide his own way.

We have good days, but there are others where we want to be noticed, and receive the glory that is God’s.

Matthew 6:1, 5, 16 (NIV) ¹⁴“Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. ⁵“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁶“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

I know people, even ministers, who go to church to be seen by men.

I know people who give money to the church to be noticed and congratulated.

I know people who have been baptized for all the wrong reasons, and it did them no heavenly good.

Man is not good enough, not perfect enough, to ever save himself. No rite, sacrament or man of the cloth can ever save us. That can only be accomplished by:

B. God's efforts

The possibility of our salvation was accomplished on the cross by Jesus. He died willingly a horrible death to atone for our sins. Only *his* sacrifice could ever pay the debt we owe. We can never earn our salvation.

Does that mean we don’t try to be good? Of course not. In fact, because of what Jesus has already done for us, if we decide to become a Christian, his love clearly demonstrated on the cross motivates us to always do our best for His glory.

Ephesians 2:8-10 (NIV) ⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Conclusion: Appropriate counsel is found with two of Paul’s proteges:

II Timothy 3:12 (NIV) ¹²In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

Luke 6:26 (NIV) ²⁶Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.

As Christians we should expect opposition and persecution if we are living for Jesus. The world hates the light. It hated Jesus; it will hate us. But no matter what pressure may be applied, no matter how much ridicule of our holy lives, we must stand under the cross willing to do whatever is necessary to follow our Savior.

Matthew 5:10-12 (NIV) ¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

You want a blessed life? Be willing to follow God inspite of persecution.

You want to be happy? Think of God and others ahead of yourself.

This week I held two funeral services for two of our faithful members and I recalled a piece by Max Lucado (*The Applause of Heaven*, Max Lucado, quoted in *Stories for the Heart*, p. 278).

You’ll be home soon, too. You may not have noticed it, but you are closer to home than ever before. Each moment is a step taken. Each breath is a page turned. Each day is a mile marked, a mountain climbed. You are closer to home than you’ve ever been.

Before you know it, your appointed arrival time will come; you’ll descend the ramp and enter the City. You’ll see faces that are waiting for you. You’ll hear your name spoken by those who love you. And, maybe, just maybe--in the back, behind the crowds--the One who would rather die than live without you will remove his pierced hands from his heavenly robe and...applaud.