



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Fifteen Sunday after Trinity

**Galatians 6:11-18 &
St. Matthew 6:24-34**

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In what do you glory? What is it that you want people to remember you for? What is your passion? Or let me put it this way: In what do you trust? Would people remember you mainly as a person of generosity? Of good works? Of graciousness and mercy? Or in a different vein: For your passion for the environment? Your patriotism? Your devotion to your work and your career? Would they remember you for a hobby you were devoted to? Maybe an old classic car? Or a bunch of old camping lanterns? A sports team? What about a lifetime of delicious baking or handicrafts? Would people remember you for your devotion to your money or the earthly possessions you worked so hard to accumulate? On exactly what do you stake your reputation? What is your heart passionate about? And in what do you trust for your security?

I'm sure all sorts of answers have been running through your heads as I've asked these questions. Now compare the things that came to mind with what St. Paul says in Galatians 6:14. This is the verse that sums up today's theme. Paul writes, "But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." Brothers and Sisters, the cross of Christ changed *everything* for Paul. It was his devotion to Jesus and, more importantly, his *complete* trust in Jesus that he wanted to be known for. When Paul died, no one was talking about what a big Canucks fan he was. They were talking about what a big fan of

Jesus he was. He spent his life making tents for a living. Considering his work ethic, I bet he made a really great tent. But when Paul died, no one was talking about his tents or how he'd made such a secure future for himself financially because of his superior product line. No. Paul died for the sake of Christ—in the line of gospel duty—and people remember him for his devotion to Jesus—for the fact that he trusted in his Lord so much that he was willing to follow him to death.

In our Epistle we see Paul closing his letter to the Christians in the Galatian churches. In fact, half-way through this last chapter—Chapter Six—Paul brings his argument to a climax and to make his point even stronger he takes the paper away from his secretary and writes the words himself. In verse 11 he writes, "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand." What he has to say here was incredibly important and it was important because it was on what he writes here that the Gospel stands or falls—and more importantly, it's what he writes here on which their hope stands or falls.

As I explained last week, the letter to the Galatians was written to a group of churches that were under the influence of some people we call the "Judaizers". They were people who insisted that in order to be a true Christian, you first had to be a good Jew. You had to be circumcised, eat only clean foods, follow the Jewish calendar, and ultimately live according to the Old Testament law. The problem is that this wasn't the Gospel that Paul had taught them. It wasn't the Gospel at all, in fact. If what you trust in is flesh the only works you'll ever produce are the works of the flesh—those things like sexual immorality and drunkenness and fits of anger and strife that Paul listed in last week's Epistle. The flesh is in bondage to sin and it's dead. Jesus gives life. He's the one who plunges us into the Holy Spirit when we reach out to him in faith through the waters

of Baptism. *Only* Jesus gives life. Only the Spirit unites us with him and causes us to bear good fruit. And so Paul reminds us that we need to trust in Jesus and Jesus alone. This is what it means to repent. And so in verses 12 and 13 Paul warns them:

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.

Remember that the first Christians were Jews. Christianity wasn't a new religion so much as it was a new way of being Jewish—of being the people of God. They struggled with incorporating Gentiles. Did they have to become Jews first? Circumcision was important. In many ways it was the Old Testament equivalent of Baptism. It's what marked you out as a Jew. It's also worth noting that Jerome and Augustine both thought that the Judaizers really got a foothold in the Galatian churches during one of the times of persecution. In the Roman Empire Jews had a special status. Normally the Romans required that conquered peoples submit to their gods and to the lordship of Caesar. Over the centuries the Jews had caused enough trouble and put up a loud enough fuss that the Romans granted them an exemption. The Jews promised to pray for Caesar in exchange for not having to acknowledge him as divine. In the first years after Jesus' ascension, Christians continued to worship in the Jewish synagogues and as far as the Romans were concerned, Christians were just another Jewish sect and they left them alone. It took a while before Christianity reached the Gentile world and a few decades longer before people started seeing Christianity as something independent from Judaism. And so when the Romans started persecuting Christians, it became very tempting for Christians to sort of deny

Jesus and claim they were Jews. Maybe they didn't deny him outright. They still claimed they were Christians, but when the Roman soldiers came, instead of clearly proclaiming Jesus as their Lord, they'd hedge around the issue and claim they were Jews—they could even show the soldiers they were circumcised—and of course everyone knew that Jews didn't worship Jesus. Not only was it an utterly terrible witness, it demonstrated very plainly that these people really did not trust in God. In contrast, Paul, who was a Jew and could have made the same kind of claims, consistently claimed Jesus as his Lord even though it meant his own martyrdom.

The end result was that these Judaisers were pushing their brothers and sisters into a life of religious legalism that undermined the gospel. They were trusting in the flesh, not in Jesus and the Spirit. From what Paul describes here, we can almost envision them clapping the gentile men on the back after they were circumcised, as if they were now somehow *real* Christians. They revelled in the law and yet, Paul rebukes them, they didn't really keep the law. For all their law-keeping—circumcision, diet, and Sabbath keeping—they were biting and devouring each other. But that's so often how legalism works. We keep the parts of the law we want, but ignore the others. That's what it means to live by the flesh. But we do it because it makes us feel good if we can keep score—if we can find some way to feel like we're doing well and earning God's favour. Fallen men and women are prideful by nature. Turning to Jesus requires humility—it requires we admit our sins, it requires repentance, it requires letting go of everything, and putting all of our trust in Jesus and Jesus alone. And so Christians are always finding new ways to say they trust in Jesus, while still trusting in themselves—even if only just a little bit—so that they don't have to completely give up their pride.

We glory in our good works, we glory in our right doctrine, we glory in our financial contributions to the kingdom, we glory in our ministries or our church buildings. There are all sorts of things we take pride in, as if we did it on our own. Or maybe we know better than to trust in the things we do, but we compromise the faith to make it easier for ourselves—or more palatable to the unbelievers around us. But Brothers and Sisters, that's not what true repentance looks like. And so Paul steps in and reminds us that there's only one thing we should glory in. Look at verses 14 to 16:

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. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

The word Paul uses when he talks about “boasting” is a word that refers to the thing or things that we put our confidence in. The Judaisers were putting their confidence in their circumcision and in their living by the law. Paul had been there. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. He had been a member of the Sanhedrin—the governing religious body of the Jews. He had been a rabbi and more specifically a Pharisee. And yet on the road to Damascus to persecute more Christians Paul had been met by the risen Jesus and realised that not one of all those things he valued, boasted about, and put his confidence in would see him into the age to come. The life of God, the life of the kingdom comes only through faith in Jesus, God's Messiah, Creation's Lord, who died to conquer sin and rose to life again, putting death itself to death. There is nothing else; only Jesus. God doesn't care if you're circumcised in the flesh; he cares if you're circumcised in your heart and if you've been made a new

creation in Jesus and by the work of the Spirit. Paul says, “Peace and mercy” be on you if you walk by this rule of the Spirit. He crushes the Judaisers. They were trying to mark themselves out as God's people by keeping the Old Testament law. Paul says, “You won't find peace or mercy there. Relying on the flesh won't get you there. It comes only by faith in Jesus. Forget the rule of the law; all that does is make you *look* like Israel. Follow the rule of grace, the rule of the Spirit, the law of love, and Jesus will bind you into his body and make you part of the *true* Israel. And, as we read last week, in Jesus and the Spirit, you'll end up keeping the law—loving God and loving neighbour—better than the old Israel ever did.

In verse 17 Paul appeals to his own example when he writes:

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

Paul's sort of calling them spiritual wimps. When it came to persecution they had found a way to get around declaring Jesus to be their Lord. They should have been shamed in that, but instead they took pride. In contrast, Paul points to the scars he had received for the sake of the Gospel—scars and injuries from the times he'd been whipped and beaten, and from the rocks that had been thrown at him when he was stoned and left for dead. He wasn't afraid to call Jesus Lord. He didn't look for a way out of it or a way to save his skin—even years later when it meant that he was martyred for that faith. Do you know what a martyr is? It's from a Greek word that means to be a *witness*. The Church has always honoured martyrs because they're the ones who stick to their guns and refuse to deny Jesus as Lord even when it means torture and death. It was that kind of a witness along with the ordinary witness of faithful men and women that gradually turned

the Roman empire away from paganism and to the Gospel.

Think of that now in terms of the time and place we live in. Every few months I read about a new survey on religious trends in North America. More and more people are turning away from the Church. It's not really that people are less "spiritual", but that they're looking for salvation—or really they're looking for affirmation—in false religions and idolatry of their own making. A few years ago I was with some other pastors and we got to wondering what percentage of our community attends church. We ran through all the churches in town and how many each seats and figured that if every church had one service on Sunday and filled every seat, there would only be room for a couple per cent of the Comox Valley's population. Brothers and sisters, we truly live in a pagan world. It's a mission field not that unlike the one the early Christian martyrs lived in and we need to see it that way. We need to have a heart to see people come to Jesus and that means that *we need to be martyrs—we need to be witnesses—for the gospel.*

We don't witness the faith as well as we should. But compromising the faith, as the Galatians did, isn't the only way that we compromise our witness. Think back to those questions I asked when we started. What do you think you'll be known for after you're gone? Will people remember you for your devotion to Jesus or for your devotion to other things in life? Will they remember that you served God with your whole being and trusted him wholly to provide for you? Or will they remember someone who was always stressed out about how to make ends meet or maybe someone who worked hard so that he could have all sorts of really nice "stuff" and go on expensive holidays? Paul worked for a living, but ask yourself: Do we remember him for his trust in God and his

devotion to the Gospel or do we remember him for the tents he made? In our Gospel lesson Jesus tells us:

No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and [mammon]. (Matthew 6:24)

Mammon is an Aramaic word that describes earthly goods—all of our "stuff"—and always in a derogatory sense. "Stuff" is necessary to live, but *mammon* has connotations of materialism, of "stuff" that displaces God. Devotion to *mammon* is the exact opposite of what Jesus refers to when he talks about laying up treasures in heaven. Jesus' point is that the heart can only have *one* master and that our heart's master needs to be God. It's not that there aren't other things that we need to take care of in this life. Again, Paul spent plenty of time making tents so that he could earn money to buy food and shelter and to pay for all his travel expenses. The thing to remember is that Paul didn't let his work—or even his need for food and shelter—become his master.

Our problem is that we too often let anxiety rule our hearts. As Christians that doesn't make sense. We say we trust God for our salvation—something *huge* and with eternal ramifications—but then when it comes to the things of today—food, clothing, shelter—we get anxious and we trust in our own ability to meet them instead of God's ability to take care of us. Do we really think that our Creator—the God who made heaven and earth, who made each of us, who tells us how much he loves us, who has promised us life in his new creation, isn't capable of taking care of us here and now—and even when we're faced with death? And yet what does it communicate to the unbelievers around us when they hear us talk about trusting Jesus, but see us

going through life fretting over our daily bread?

This is why Jesus tells us: "Don't be anxious about your life or about what you're going to eat or drink or wear. There's more to life than that." He points to the birds and reminds us that they don't have jobs, but God takes care of them. He points to the flowers in the field. They don't work, but God clothes them in beauty. He reminds those of you from Saskatchewan of the fields of wheat and how beautiful God has made them and then asks, "If God makes something so beautiful that's only going to be cut down and ground into bread flour, what makes you think that he won't take care of you, the child that he loves?"

Jesus reminds us, "Gentiles get stressed out over things like this." They don't know God. They haven't experienced his love and provision. They don't have the Scriptures to give them example after example after example of how God takes care of his people. But you! You're his people, his children, why do you trust him with eternity and then act like the Gentiles do when it comes to the things you need today?" Jesus gives us that reminder that I'm sure we've all memorised even if we haven't done very well living it out:

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Seek first the kingdom of God and be a living witness to God's goodness. Devote yourself to him and he will take care of you. Show the people around you your faith and the power of the Gospel by truly living it—by trusting in God for everything in life even when life is hard and even when it doesn't make any worldly sense to trust him.

Brothers and Sisters let me close by saying that our Lord calls us to be witnesses—to be martyrs for the faith.

We live in a world that is in desperate need of the Good News. We aren't being put to death for our faith like those early Christians were. Our problem isn't necessarily that of the Galatian Judaisers who were compromising their faith in Jesus in order to save their skins from the arena. But, Brothers and Sisters, how often do we compromise our witness in other ways? Do we find ways to avoid a clear witness to our faith in Jesus in order to avoid the world's ridicule or to avoid controversy with friends or family or co-workers? And how often does the world look at us and see only divided loyalties? They know we go to church on Sunday and that we profess Jesus to be Lord, but they see us devoted to and serving other things. When we die they'll say, "So-and-so was a devoted Canucks fan, or he was a workaholic, or she spent every waking hour on her hobbies and handicrafts...oh, yeah, and he went to church too—as if that last bit was only an afterthought. That's not really much of a witness. Our lives may not be on the line, but consider that if our witness is weak, we're putting the lives of unbelievers on the line. If we don't witness Jesus to them in word *and* in action, who will? God asked Isaiah, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?" God asks the same thing of us and I think our tendency is to duck and cover. "Who, me? No, not me! I don't know how. I'm not equipped. I'm not a radical. I don't want people to think I'm a crazy religious zealot!" Friends, we need to be like Isaiah. He had seen the holiness of God. He knew his own sinfulness and the sinfulness of his people and because of that he knew what the eternal consequences would be if no one went and he cried out, "Here am I! Send me!" Friends, that doesn't necessarily mean travelling a half-world away from home. More often than not we can answer God's call—we can say, "Here I am! Send me!"—by simply devoting ourselves to Jesus, by being unwilling to compromise our faith, and by

consciously and whole-heartedly trusting in the promises of our heavenly Father in such a way that everyone around us sees. In Christ we have been crucified to the world and the world to us, like St. Paul, let us then glory, boast, and trust in the cross and only in the cross.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, thank you for your saving grace and for your promise of care. Forgive us for the times when we put other things in life first. Forgive for the many times that we compromise our witness to your Gospel. Teach us, we pray, to trust you in every area of life that the people around us might see our witness and be drawn to you. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Saviour. Amen.