

"Boasting in the Cross"

Galatians 6:11-18

Baxter Exum (#986)
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Introduction:

This morning I would like for us to take a few moments to study the closing verses of the New Testament book of **Galatians**. In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on **page 1826**. The end of the book of **Galatians** is a little unusual. Normally, the apostle Paul would close with some kind of very personal greeting. He would often mention people by name. But in the book of **Galatians**, we have a little insight into how the letter was actually written. Many people do not realize this, but pen-to-paper, Paul did not actually "write" most of his books; but, like many people in positions of leadership today, Paul apparently had an assistant who would actually do the writing. And so when we get to the end of **Galatians**, the door opens just a little bit, and we see that Paul adds a personal note in his own handwriting. If we were looking at the original letter to the churches of Galatia, we could actually see the change in writing.

In **Galatians 6**, starting in **verse 11**, Paul says, **"See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand."** And so as he wraps up the book of **Galatians**, the message is extremely important. It is something that Paul wants the early Christians to understand above everything else. The whole book has been an encouragement to stand firm against the false teachers who were trying to bring them back under the Law of Moses, and in these closing verses, Paul once again refers to those false teachers—religious leaders who were proud of all the wrong things. With great sadness, then, Paul is making a very important point. If you will, please look with me at the closing paragraph of the book of **Galatians**—**»PPT»**—**Galatians 6:11-18...**

¹¹ See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. ¹² Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. ¹³ For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh. ¹⁴ But may it never be that I would 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 For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. ¹⁶ And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. ¹⁷ From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on

my body the brand-marks of Jesus. ¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.

Paul, therefore, takes the pen into his own hand, he takes it away from the secretary, and he restates once again what has been the main focus of this whole letter, and as we see in **verse 14**, the apostle Paul narrows it down to the one thing that really matters, the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, as Paul says, ***"But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."*** This morning, I would like for us to look very carefully at **verse 14** as we try to apply this verse to our lives today.

I. As we look at verse 14, one of the first things we notice is that THE APOSTLE Paul seems to forbid CERTAIN KINDS OF boasting. »PPT»

Of course, there is an exception (and we will get to that in a few minutes), but for now, we need to realize that there is a danger in boasting outside the exception that is given later. As I understand it, the word that is translated here as **"boast"** can also be translated as to **"glory in,"** to **"trust in,"** to **"rejoice in,"** to **"revel in,"** or **"to live for."** So it is not just the idea of bragging about something, but it is the idea of living for something and being happy about it. In that context, Paul says, ***"But may it never be that I would boast."***

Unfortunately, though, it seems that people will put their trust in just about anything. In our society, it seems that people often live for their physical appearance. Years ago, I remember meeting a weightlifter, and this guy was absolutely obsessed with his physical appearance. One day he came over and was all discouraged about life, and he pointed to the crease between his arm and his chest. And almost crying, he explained that that crease meant that he was gaining weight. So here was someone in the prime of his life in nearly perfect physical condition, and he was consumed with the idea of a crease in his armpit! There was a man who gloried in his physical appearance. He lived for looking good.

Others may live for their political accomplishments. After all, politicians get elected based on who does a better job boasting about what they have done. Businesses make their money by boasting about their products. Individuals sometimes boast in their education—**"I have this degree and you do not."** Perhaps others glory in having a nice home. Some will brag about driving a powerful car. Here in Madison, some will boast in NOT having a powerful car—some will boast in their amazing gas mileage. Not too long ago, there was even some kind of conference here in town for people known as "hyper-milers," those who live to squeeze every possible mile out of every drop of gas. And there is nothing wrong with saving gas, but sometimes people will get involved in religion with the same attitude. Preachers can get obsessed with large numbers. Churches can get in over their heads in a building project, trying to maintain some kind of image in the community. Individual Christians can revel in the fact that they have never missed a service, or maybe that they read the Bible through several times every year. And again, there is nothing

wrong with having a church building or daily Bible reading, but these are not reasons for “boasting.” This is not what we live for, this is not what we glory in, this is not what we trust in.

As we look back at **Galatians 6**, we find that the false teachers were boasting, and it had turned very negative. In fact, back up in **verse 12**, Paul says that certain people wanted to ***“make a good showing in the flesh,”*** and so they were forcing the issue of circumcision on the early church. They wanted to rack up the numbers. They wanted to look good in the eyes of their Jewish friends. They were scared of persecution. Their main goal was not to win more people to Christ, they did not really care about helping people grow in their faith—they were concerned with looking good. They wanted to ***“make a good showing in the flesh.”*** At the end of **verse 13**, they wanted to ***“boast in their flesh.”*** They were racking up numbers, they wanted to look good, and so they fell into a very dangerous trap.

Someone has said that we want the Lord’s church to grow, ***“...not so that we can count people, but because people count.”*** The false teachers in **Galatians 6** had forgotten that. They wanted their new converts to look good to their old Jewish friends. But isn’t it interesting that Paul never brags about his old Jewish heritage? And Paul had so much he could have bragged about! Over in **Philippians 3**, Paul referred to himself as being, ***“...circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.”*** Paul went on to say, though, ***“But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.”*** In other words, Paul had the credentials. He could have bragged. He could have grown old as a respected scholar in Judaism. He could have had the praise of his fellow Jews. But as he said in **Galatians 6:14**, ***“...may it never be that I would boast....”***

In other words, these things did not bring Paul any closer to the God he was trying so hard to serve. This morning, then, we need to be aware that what happened to the Christians in Galatia can just as easily happen to any of us even today. We can also be distracted by the things that do not really matter, and in the face of that temptation, Paul would warn us about the danger of boasting. ***“But may it never be that I would boast.”***

II. But as we look back at verse 14, we find that Paul gives an exception, as we find that he will boast, “in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”
»PPT»

We mention the cross today, and different things come to mind to different people. Some will think of a beautiful piece of jewelry—perhaps smooth, and gold, maybe even with an intricate design or precious stones inlaid—as a lapel pin or dangling on

the end of a beautiful gold chain around a woman's neck. This past week, I walked to the Target near our house for some coffee and breakfast, and on the way in, I saw a woman there in the eating area with a beautiful cross—it was black, it was rather large, and it had some kind of jewels on it—very beautiful. I was a little surprised that they would let her wear it to work like that, and it probably took some level of courage to wear it. We can certainly admire her for that. Perhaps others will think of the American Red Cross and the fact that the cross is probably the most universally recognized symbol for paramedics, for those who offer lifesaving help to those in need. Perhaps others will think of the giant cross near the interstate down in Effingham, Illinois—nearly 200 feet tall—visible for miles at all times of night and day. As I was preparing for this morning's lesson, I discovered that in the city of Jerusalem, crosses are available to rent—you can actually rent a cross to retrace the footsteps of Jesus in the city of Jerusalem.

And so, just from looking at the use of the cross in the world around us, it is obvious that the world has forgotten what the cross really represents. The cross was not a piece of jewelry. The cross was not a symbol of help. The cross was not something that you could rent from a Muslim street vendor in the streets of Jerusalem. The cross was not a tourist attraction. Instead, the cross would have been the ancient version of the electric chair or the gas chamber, the guillotine or the hangman's noose. The cross was a tool of death. But even beyond that, the cross was a tool of torture, a tool of humiliation. We know from history that crucifixion was developed by the Persians and adapted by the Romans. But it was so inhumane, though, that under Roman law it was illegal for a Roman citizen to ever be crucified. No matter what they did, the cross was not an option for a Roman citizen. It was that bad. The cross represented shame and rejection. Earlier this year, we visited some of the catacombs in the city of Rome, and on that visit we did not see any crosses down there! We saw drawings of fish. We saw drawings of anchors. We saw drawings of a shepherd carrying a sheep—these were all ancient symbols of the Christian faith—but no crosses. The cross was not used until around 500 AD. In the ancient Roman world, the cross was a symbol of shame.

Cicero, the ancient Roman politician and historian had this to say, **"Let the very name of the cross be far away not only from the body of a Roman citizen, but even from his thoughts, his eyes, his ears."** And so the cross was practically a profanity in the ancient world. It was a vulgar word. It was a word that was hardly spoken. The cross was feared. If we can imagine wearing a necklace with a little golden electric chair hanging off of it, then we start to see cross for what it really is.

So when Paul talks about boasting **"...in the cross,"** he is not talking about the cross itself—he is not talking about a piece of wood on a hill outside Jerusalem—he is not talking about a piece of jewelry, he is not talking about a 200-foot monument by the side of the road, but he is talking about, **"...the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."** He is talking about the Lord! He is talking about the Lord's death and the Lord's sacrifice for our sins. In fact, Jesus is mentioned at least 45 times in the book of Galatians—only six chapters long, but Jesus is the focus.

And yet when Paul went around the ancient Roman world preaching that the Son of God had died on a cross, the idea was absolutely ridiculous. The Roman historian Plinius Secundus called the preaching of the cross, **"...a perverse and extravagant superstition,"** and said that the early Christians were basically mentally ill, that they suffered from a form of dementia. The Roman orator Caecilius said that Christians suffered from **"sick delusions"** and a **"senseless and crazy superstition."** He went on to say, **"...not the least among the monstrosities of their faith is the fact that they worship one who has been crucified."**

Archaeologists have even uncovered a little bit of graffiti in a guard room near the Circus Maximus in ancient Rome. **»PPT»** The crude drawing dates to around 200 AD and pictures a man with the head of a donkey hanging on a cross. Beside the cross, there is a stick figure of a man looking up at the cross with his hand raised, and the caption says, **"Alexamenos worships (his) God."** The ancient Christians, therefore, were ridiculed for worshiping a God who had been crucified. So that tells us how the cross was viewed in the ancient world.

Paul, though, could glory in the cross, because Paul knew that the cross was necessary. The cross had been foretold by the prophets. As Isaiah said in **Isaiah 53:4-7** (several hundred years before the cross was even invented by the Persians), Isaiah said, ***"Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth."*** This is why John the Baptist announced the coming of Jesus by saying, ***"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*** (**John 1:29**).

As Paul said in **1 Corinthians 1**, ***"For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ...but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."*** The Bible speaks of Jesus enduring the **"shame"** of the cross (in **Hebrews 12:2**).

And now the most horrible and shameful form of death has become the price that was paid for our salvation. The beauty of the cross has nothing to do with silver or gold or even a fine piece of furniture that now be rented in the city of Jerusalem, but the cross has everything to do with the love of God. As Jesus said in **John 3:16**, ***"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."*** When Paul talked about boasting in the cross, then, he was not bragging. He was not full of pride and arrogance. But he understood that the cross had come to represent the

love of God. It was the kind of pride we might have as we tell someone about a friend who saved our life.

For people with real pride, the cross is a problem, because the cross is embarrassing. The false teachers were looking for a reason to brag, but for them the cross was a reason to be ashamed. The cross was a reason to be afraid. Paul, though, preached the cross with honor. For Paul, the cross was something to boast about. It was something to be happy about. It was something in which to revel. For Paul, the cross was precious. I don't know about you, but I hope we have a chance to meet Alexamenos some day—to meet a man who was ridiculed for his Christian faith.

»PPT»

III. Thankfully, Paul goes a little further in verse 14, because he answers the “So what?” question—What does all of this mean for those of us here this morning? At the end of verse 14, Paul applies it as he refers to the cross, “THROUGH WHICH THE WORLD HAS BEEN CRUCIFIED TO ME, AND I TO THE WORLD.” »PPT»

The scholars tell us that Paul uses the perfect tense here, referring to a past action with results that continue into the present. In other words, at some point in the past Paul himself was crucified to the world, and the results of that action continue into the present as he writes this letter. We can't help but think of Paul's words to the church in Rome in Romans 6:3-7, ***“Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.”*** Paul, therefore, was crucified with Christ at the point of his baptism. And when Paul talks about being dead to the world, he is not talking about the world in the sense of birds, and flowers, and trees, but he is talking about being dead to the worldly way of thinking. Paul had been down that road, and he was not going back. As Paul would write to the church in Corinth, we are to be in the world but not of the world. We remember the song we sometimes sing, ***“Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death of Christ, my God; All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood.”***

The cross changes everything. According to Paul in Galatians 2:20, ***“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”*** The cross changes the way we live. Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 16:24, ***“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.”***

Looking back at the cross changes the way we treat our wives. As Paul says in **Ephesians 5:25**, ***"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her."***

The cross changes the way we look at giving. In the context of the weekly contribution, Paul said in **2 Corinthians 8:9**, ***"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich."***

The cross changes the way we look at our fellow Christians. As Paul says in **Philippians 2**, ***"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who...humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."***

The cross changes the way we live. As Paul said in **Colossians 3:1-3**, ***"Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God."*** The cross changes everything!

As we sometimes sing, ***"Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."*** We have been crucified to the world.

Conclusion & Invitation:

As we close our thoughts this morning, I hope we realize that what happened on the cross is the most important event in world history. A lot of people just do not want to think about it, and yet all people are being called upon to make a decision. Like the Jews, we can trip over it, like the Greeks, we can consider it foolishness, or like the apostle Paul we can submit to it. We can obey the gospel. We can allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism, and like the apostle Paul, we can never look back at the world in the same way again. If you are ready to make that decision, you can let us know about it as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

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