

Galatians 6:11-18
How to avoid persecution
Notes for a sermon given at
Christ Church Liverpool
December 2003

My sister has a handbag. In fact she has quite a lot of handbags. In them, like most women, she keeps all sorts of things that are entirely mysterious to me. I have no idea what some of them do – let alone why you might need them whilst out shopping!

Anyway that's not really my point this morning – though if anyone can explain to me the mystery of women's handbags do come and find me afterwards.

This morning what's important is that one of the many handbags in my sister's life story is a **Prada** handbag. That, apparently means that it's very expensive – a designer handbag.

However Helen bought it in New York on a business trip and it cost her \$10. And of course we all know what that means – it means it's a fake, an imitation Prada handbag. And, not being stupid, my sister realised this, decided that at \$10 it didn't really matter too much and bought it anyway. She brought it back to London and proudly showed her fake Prada bag to all her friends at work.

One of her friends however, who used to work in a very posh clothes shop in London where they sold such things, took a close look at the lining, which had little Prada logos embossed all over it. This friend was absolutely certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the bag was genuine. And since it only cost \$10 that means that this was a stolen handbag, somewhat to my sister's embarrassment as she hadn't anticipated buying a "hot" handbag.

It was the logos that gave the game away. They were the impossible to fake marks of a genuine Prada handbag. Although it isn't always easy to spot fakes generally speaking, whatever you're wanting to check up on, whether it's a £20 note, a designer label, or a low mileage 2nd hand car, there is something, some mark, some feature, that will make it clear whether what you are getting is the real thing.

So what about Christians? Does the same apply to them? Is there an authenticating mark of a true Christian? Or of a true local church? Is there a way that you can be sure someone is the genuine article?

If you'd asked the new teachers in Galatia that question I suspect that they might have sucked their teeth in the manner of a plumber or a builder who is about to give you a very large quotation for what you thought was going to be a very small job...

"Oooooohhhh," they would have said. "That's a tricky one. You see that's the weakness in Paul's message really isn't it. There just isn't any outward sign that you are committed to living God's way and maintaining a relationship with him. If you really want to make it clear where you stand, if you want a mark that makes you stand out as a Christian then, to be honest boys, you need to get circumcised."

But Paul won't have that. And in this final section of his letter to the Galatians Paul wants to make it absolutely clear that you won't find out about the marks of an authentic Christian listening to the new teachers.

In fact, Paul says, the logo of an authentic Christian isn't directly a physical mark at all.

Instead the contrast between the true Christian and the false teacher is exposed by two boasts and two results.

1 Two Boasts – the flesh or the cross

I wonder if at any point during our look at Galatians you've wondered why is it that the new teachers were so keen to get the Galatian Christians circumcised? Why were they piling on the pressure?

It sounds from v12 as if they were really turning the screw – they are trying to COMPEL the Galatians to be circumcised. That's pretty strong language isn't it?

You might think that the new teachers make a huge issue of this because they thought that God's law in the Old Testament was really important. Because they revered and loved God's standards.

But Paul says it's nothing to do with their regard for what God said to Moses and the Israelites. In fact they don't even obey the law themselves.

V13 – Not EVEN those who are circumcised obey the law.

That may be because these people were teaching that you only had to obey some of the law and that circumcision was the most important. Or it may be that they taught that

you had to obey all of the law but simply failed to live up to own standards.

Either way, says Paul, these people are telling you to start down a road that they are not walking on themselves. It's not that they have such a high view of the law. It's that they have such a high view **of themselves**.

Why do they want the Galatians to be circumcised?

V13: *So that they may boast about your flesh.*

All these new teachers were concerned about was claiming another scalp, another convert for their cause. For their group. For their party.

- These people weren't looking at how godly the life of the church was.
- They weren't seeking to encourage people to continue trusting the gospel so that the fruit of the Spirit may be displayed in their life.
- They weren't in labour pains for the church like Paul was.

They were just counting circumcisions. They wanted to be able to boast that they have lots of converts to their thing, lots of people signing up to their distinctive brand of Christianity.

How different Paul was! What did Paul boast in?

Well he knew he wasn't perfect but his passion and desire was that he might never boast except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, v14.

In other words the only thing that mattered to Paul was the cross. That was what he boasted in.

And I think there are two very striking things about the concept of boasting in the cross.

The first is just how culturally inappropriate it was. The word cross is rarely found in ancient literature outside of the Bible. Not because they didn't talk about crucifixion but because they didn't like to use the word cross. When a Roman magistrate was sentencing someone to be crucified they didn't say "crucify him". They said "hang him on the unlucky tree". Polite people just didn't talk about the cross – and here's Paul saying that the cross is what he wants to boast in!

The second thing that's striking about Paul's boasting in the cross is just how different it is from boasting in the flesh. The new teachers were proud of something they had done – how many people THEY had got circumcised. Paul boasted in what JESUS had done – in the power of the cross of Jesus to bring forgiveness, to bring a perfect relationship with God for all who trust in Jesus.

And these two kinds of boasting are totally mutually exclusive.

As John Stott puts it in his excellent commentary: "*We cannot boast in ourselves and in the cross simultaneously.*"

You can't boast in the cross – recognise that you've nothing to contribute to your salvation and that Jesus has done everything – AND be proud of how many people have joined your group. You just can't do those things at the same time.

So what about us? What's our boast? What do we as individuals and we as a church boast in?

The thing is, you see, we're very deceitful. And we can make it sound like we are very pious evangelicals for whom Jesus is very important. And yet we can still be boasting in the flesh rather than in the cross.

One of the things I've noticed about planting a church is how easily we become obsessed with numbers. How many people are here today? How many people came to housegroup? Are attendances at the Prayer & Praise growing?

Maybe that's just me but I suspect not. Now there's nothing wrong with church statistics. And of course we want Christ Church to grow. And if nobody comes to stuff we have to ask if we're doing the right stuff and all that kind of thing.

But when we get to the stage, as we have a couple of times over the last 3 months, where people say that on the basis of low numbers at one thing, one week we need to change it I'd want to ask whether we are boasting in the flesh or in the cross?

What is at the centre of our definition of success if what matters most is how many people come to things?

Because there are plenty of evangelical churches out there that seem to measure success in terms of the number of baptisms they performed last year or the number of

people who went through their Alpha course or the number of cells or small groups they have started. And I can't see much difference between that and the new teachers in Galatia whose definition of success was how many people had been circumcised and joined their thing.

So what will it look like for us as a church to boast in the cross?

Well I think it'll mean that we'll evaluate everything we do in cross centred terms.

- Are people growing in their understanding of the cross?
- Do we as a church recognise the Christian freedom that we have or are we lapsing into legalism and ritual?
- Are we explaining the Bible clearly in our meetings so that people can understand why the cross was necessary, what it achieved and how we should respond to the cross?

Now figures about how many people were baptised or went to Christianity Explored or came consistently to pray on a Sunday evening MIGHT help us answer those questions. And we should look at that information to see if it does help us answer those questions. But they might not help us. So we mustn't become enslaved to statistics.

Paul puts it very strikingly. The centrality of the cross in his life meant that the world was crucified to him and he to the world. In other words the values and judgments that are used in the world became of no ultimate significance to Paul. He had no desire to create a Paul party who joined his thing.

I think that's why he includes v15.

Because it would be easy to read Galatians and think that Paul represented an anti-circumcision group. And to want to join it and become a campaigner against circumcision.

But Paul wasn't interested in that. He didn't care at all about circumcision. It was irrelevant to salvation. And salvation, a new creation in Christ, is what matters. Paul was only interested in a new creation. He was only interested in grace, in trusting in Jesus, in the gospel.

That, v16, is the only rule. Follow one rule for life, Paul says.

Trust Jesus. Keep trusting Jesus. And there will be no need for any other law. Sure there will be plenty of need for moral guidance. Lots of need for God's Word to teach us what it means to love God and to love our neighbour. But ultimately only one rule that counts. Trust Jesus.

And it's the tragic history of the Church that people have consistently chosen the flesh not the cross as the source of their boasting, and sought to win people for their thing, not for the gospel.

The church I have come from in Chester, Kingsway Chapel, was originally a Christian Brethren church. The Brethren were fed up with all the ritual and nonsense in the denominations. Fed up with robes and priests and bishops all of which, they felt, probably rightly, got in the way of explaining the gospel, the message of the cross of Jesus to people. They wanted to boast in the cross.

So they founded churches that tried to get rid of lots of the traditions and return to simple meetings where people taught from the Bible, explained the gospel and shared communion together as a reminder of the cross. It was a noble ideal. A good plan.

But what happened was that many of them ended up proud of their lack of "traditions", which became a tradition. So now there are churches around the nation not doing tradition in exactly the same way they were not doing tradition 100 years ago.

Uncircumcision has no value either says Paul.

What will matter at Christ Church in years to come is not whether we have or don't have traditions and ways of doing things. What will matter is whether what Jesus has done is at the centre of our church.

Are we boasting in the flesh – in what we do? Or are we boasting in the cross – what Jesus has done?

That is the thing that will mark out the true Christian from the false teacher.

But there's a second logo of an authentic Christian:

2 Two results – popularity or persecution

The new teachers in Galatia seem to have presented their teaching as a kind of advanced Christianity.

"These," they were saying, "are the things you have to do if you're a really keen Christian."

But behind all their apparent **keenness**, Paul says, is **cowardice**.

The only reason, v12, that they teach the importance of circumcision is to avoid persecution for the cross of Christ.

We're not quite sure why in this particular case preaching circumcision would have meant they avoided persecution. It may be that as Judaism was a licensed religion of the Roman Empire being circumcised meant Christianity would be covered by the umbrella of Judaism and thus tolerated by the Romans. Or it may be that if the Christians got themselves circumcised they would have done enough to satisfy the Jewish zealots who were amongst the first persecutors of the church.

Maybe it was to prevent persecution by the Romans, maybe by the Jews. Maybe both. But it doesn't really matter why it was.

Because it is always true that a cross free religion will be much less persecuted than a cross centred one.

The reason for that is that the message of the cross is supremely and uniquely offensive to sinful men and women.

People hate the cross. They hate the fact that the cross says there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. They hate the fact that the cross says we are so sinful, so wicked, that the very Son of God has to die in order to rescue us. They hate the fact that the cross says that before God we all stand equal and that no marks of race, class or moral uprightness will make us superior.

As John Stott puts it: "*Nothing in the universe cuts us down to size like the cross.*"

And people hate that.

I came across an interesting illustration of this just on Friday as I was visiting Lancaster University. I was meeting someone in the chaplaincy centre of the university for a coffee and was just standing in the foyer waiting and reading the history of the place. The building stands on its own at the front of the campus with three great metal spikes rising up towards the sky. Apparently the original plan had been to have three big crosses on top of the centre and these had actually been manufactured. But people were so violently

opposed to the idea that they actually sawed the arms off these metal crosses!

They were so keen to avoid persecution that they replaced the cross of Christ, where the love and justice of God is perfectly revealed for the world to see, with some metal spikes pointing into empty sky. They decided to emphasise their belief that each person is making their own journey towards God in their own way.

I'm sure their decision was a popular one. Because, just like the Galatian false teachers, they replaced what God has done with what we can do. And that, Paul says, v12, makes a good impression.

Whereas people who keep the cross at the centre will be persecuted.

That doesn't necessarily mean that cross-centred churches will be burned down or their members beaten up in the street – though it certainly means that in some countries.

I think it's more that people will despise and hate Christians who preach the cross.

And if you read a bit of church history you'll see that it is consistently Christians – Bible believing, cross centred Christians – who have been persecuted throughout the last 2,000 years.

That's not to say, of course, that people of other convictions and religions are never persecuted for of course sometimes they are. But there is something particularly threatening about the cross and cross centred Christians that the world especially despises.

Two boasts: the flesh or the cross.

Two results: popularity or persecution.

And finally:

3 One authentic apostle

As Paul concludes his letter he returns, finally, to where he began. With a defence of his authority as an apostle, as a messenger of Jesus Christ.

V17: *Let no one interfere with me.*

The false teachers have no right to ask Paul to change the content of his message. Paul's gospel, the good news of Christ and the cross isn't up for negotiation.

In fact, even if Paul wanted to change the Christian message, even if he wanted to say that it wasn't all about what Jesus had done. Even if he wanted to introduce circumcision, keeping rules or doing any good work as a way of earning a part of our salvation. Even if he wanted to do that he couldn't.

Paul could not change the gospel message. Because it wasn't his message to change. Paul wasn't a creative story teller. He was a servant, a branded, marked servant of someone else.

That's what he means when he says "*I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.*"

Paul's physical scars, inflicted as a result of numerous hardships and persecutions for being a Christian preacher, were an outward sign that Paul belonged to Jesus.

If you had stripped Paul naked you would have found that he was circumcised. A physical mark that in his pre-Christian days he would have been very proud of.

But now, v15, it means nothing.

But Paul has other marks. Weals across his back from when he was given the 39 lashes. Tissue scars from where bones were broken when he was pelted with stones.

Those marks mean something. Because they speak that Paul is a servant of Jesus.

Scars of persecution, the result of explaining the cross of Jesus, not circumcision or anything else to do with keeping religious rules, are the mark of an authentic apostle.

Now of course Paul was unique. His authority over the Galatian Christians isn't the same as the authority of any church leader over their church today – there are no apostles today.

But anyone who wants to be a part of a church shaped by Paul's teaching, and I hope we all do, and anyone who wants to be a Christian leader following Paul's example, should look carefully at these verses.

For Paul the only marks that mattered were those he had received as a faithful witness to Christ.

For him those were physical scars. For us the mark of faithful witness might be that people think we're pessimists because we are clear that human beings are totally tainted by sin. It might be hostility as we make it clear that trusting in the cross of Christ is the only way

to be forgiven. It might be a lower grade at work as we refuse to lie and play politics as a testimony to Jesus who is the truth.

Those marks didn't save Paul – any more than circumcision did. They won't save us.

But they can testify to the power of the cross of Jesus.

Paul's great theme in Galatians, from start to finish, is the freedom won for us by Jesus on the cross.

The cross. Where the grace of God was poured out so that people who had failed to keep God's rules, people like us, could be made right with God by trusting in the cross.

The cross. Where Jesus died so that those who have been made right with God by trusting in his death in our place can be kept right with God by continuing to trust in Jesus.

2:20: "*The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*"

Andrew Evans