

Galatians 6 – Cross Centred

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Matthew Robinson

Last week I came across a discussion of the best ways to sign off on an email as a Christian. I've put a few of the best ones up on the screen. They range from the simple classics like "God bless" to the slightly more impressive in "Christ's service", you've "Sola Dei Gloria" if you want people to know you went to a good school, "Shalom" if you want to really send off the signal of being deeply spiritual. And then you start to go down the rabbit hole a bit. "In His grip" was one suggestion I found, which just sounds uncomfortable, There's the slightly sinister "Staying light as the days grow darker", and then my personal favourite "Awaiting the Latter Rain", which I think I might just start using for all my communication. I'm sure the council will really appreciate at the end of my letter to sort out our garden waste bins. They're plenty of ways both sensible and absurd to sign off on our communications, but none of them are ever going to top Paul.

Our passage today is Paul's sign off to his letter to the Galatian church, a summing up of his message to them. It draws together all those strands that he's developed throughout the letter, with a combination of practical advice and encouragement. With it we find ourselves coming full circle. He started with a prayer for grace "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" and he ends with grace "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit". Which makes a lot of sense since this is a letter defending grace. And he points us to the cross.

The letter so far hasn't talked much about the cross, although it's definitely there, but as he draws to a close Paul makes absolutely clear that what is at stake is a true understanding of what Jesus has done on the cross and why this matters. Let me just read for you again that key verse: "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 is the thing that the whole letter, all of Paul's teaching, depends on. The cross is what makes all of it true, the cross reveals the grace of God and the cross is what makes it possible for us to receive the gift of the spirit that gives us life and freedom.

There's so much in this chapter that we could explore, but I want to focus on three aspects of the cross.

Firstly, **the cross saves**. It's so basic a truth, something that we agree with almost without thinking, that we forget how incredible, how shocking a truth it is. The cross is God intervening in history, the decisive moment for our faith. I quoted Paul's prayer for grace at the start of the letter but let's read the whole thing "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father". Jesus gave himself up on the cross to save us from our sins, to rescue us from the present evil age. He died to rescue us from the slavery of the world, to free, us to give us life.

The cross lifts us out of slavery, sets us free, it releases us from the powers of this world. "For freedom Christ has set us free", and he has set us free through the cross. The cross is the basis for the wonderful promised life of the Spirit which Paul has painted throughout the letter, eternal life, that starts with the freedom we experience now. In breaking the power of sin and the present evil age, the cross has made us a new creation. The list just keeps on going. All that God has for us, all the good things he promises to us, are won for us by Jesus going to the cross.

We often think of the spiritual as something abstract and slightly unreal. The cross doesn't allow us that option though. It's a physical, historical, tangible event. One of the reasons the cross was so scandalous, and still is scandalous, is that physicality the thought of God dying on a real, ordinary wooden cross, the kind that's heavy and can give you splinters and had to be carved out of a tree.

The claim that God died on a cross was so shocking so uncomfortable in the ancient world that Christians faced ridicule and persecution for making that claim. Paul tells us that the Judaizers, who were telling the Galatians they needed to obey the Jewish law, were trying to avoid being persecuted for the cross. I wonder if they were trying to deflect attention from the cross, that they added requirements to make it a little bit more socially acceptable to be a Christian. 'Yeah, we believe in Jesus, but we're not like those idiots who think Jesus died on the cross to save people. You still need the law to be righteous before God. It's all more of a spiritual truth anyway'.

But Jesus did die on the cross and that is how we are saved. I'm a massive history nerd; if you ever want a fun conversation with me then please chat to me about Victorian Prime Ministers. And for me one of the most powerful truths of the Christian faith is that it isn't an abstract, vague, spiritual idea, it is rooted in a historical person who lived died and rose again. The cross is the decisive moment in history where God changes things for ever. I love that my faith is based on that truth that single decisive moment in time. I love that our story is that God broke into history.

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The cross saves.

Secondly, **the cross is how we receive grace**. It takes away our ability to claim any righteousness for ourselves and forces us to depend totally on God. Paul is absolutely clear: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ”. The only standing we have, the only basis we have for claiming any righteousness is through the cross.

If there’s one thing you can’t miss in Galatians, it’s grace. Paul hammers home again and again that any righteousness we have comes from Jesus not from ourselves. “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— which is really no gospel at all.” Because there is one condition only. Believe in Jesus. That it. There’s no written exam, you don’t have to present your photographic id, just believe and receive grace, the free gift of God.

This is the part I find the hardest. It is hard. We live in a world where things are not free, where we have to work, where even the best relationships can be strained and damaged. I can hear sermons on grace, preach sermons on grace, pray to know God’s grace and read about grace, and none of that will stop me desperately trying to earn God’s love, to try and justify myself.

But I can’t earn God’s love. I will never not be a messy, broken, fallen human being and nothing I do will ever be totally untouched by sin. God loves me anyway and will never love me more or love me less. And because of that infinite love there’s Jesus, who reveals that love to the world on the cross.

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Finally, **the cross brings change**. The cross makes us into a new creation, it brings life, it gives us hope for the future. We might live in an evil age but we’re looking forward to the age to come, and because of the cross we can look forward to that with confidence.

And there’s more. Because of the cross, we become a community, a community that is radically equal and where all are welcomed and loved. “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” We are set free from slavery and placed a family, a community, a church, where we are called to love each other, care for each other, where we all united by the unity of the Spirit. And that family is the family of God himself. Because of the cross, we are adopted by the creator of the universe, the one who sustains everything.

Throughout the letter Paul gives the Galatians a choice: you can choose the flesh, the law, self-righteousness, and in the end death— or you can choose the Spirit, grace,

freedom and life, all of it won for you on the cross, and free for you to take. He sums that choice up in verse 8 of our passage this evening: “Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.” Now that might seem a little bit harsh, a little bit joyless. But he wants to make it absolutely clear: here’s the trade off, the way that doesn’t work or the way that does.

No wonder Paul is harsh with the Galatians. He cares about them. He can’t get his head around why they would trade all that for a law that can never offer any of those things, no matter how hard they try. He wants them to be part of that community of love, the family of God, he wants them to be one in Jesus Christ.

The cross changes us. It takes us from death to life, from law to grace, from sin to righteousness. It forms us together as a people, into a family. What a gift. What a miracle.

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What does all this mean for us?

I think that there is so much that we can learn, so many ways that we can be changed by contemplating the cross, that I’m not sure I can pin them down to a single practical action point, or even several action points. The nature of the cross is so simple that anyone can grasp it, and so deep that you could spend your life studying it. In a little while I’m going to invite you to pray with me, that we would be inspired, shaken and transformed by those 3 truths: That the cross saves, that the cross brings grace and that the cross changes.

But I do want to make one final point. While I was preparing this sermon, I was struck by what an absolute miracle this is, us meeting together on a Sunday evening in the year 2019. We’re here because nearly 2000 years ago, about 3000 miles away, a man was crucified on an ordinary cross. I’m not sure that should make any sense and yet I am absolutely convinced that it does, and it does because the cross really did do all the things that the letter to the Galatians says it does. It is the miracle of the cross that we are here today. It’s that miracle that we are gathered to celebrate.

“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which^[a] the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

Let’s pray.