

Digging Deeper

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What Matters Most...

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Every Tuesday night I teach a class. Last Tuesday was the first class of the term. I began to emphasize how important the subject of my class is, and why it's really important. One of the students raised his hand and very tactfully reminded me that every teacher says that their subject is the most important. How, he asked, is he supposed to reconcile all the claims about what matters most?

By my calculations, I've preached five or six hundred sermons here, and now this is my last. I'm sure that over the years I've said that this is most important or that is most important. But by God's grace my last sermon as your pastor actually does end on what is most important. I'm not just saying that as pastors do. Pastors lie all the time when they say, "This is the most important point." They don't mean to, but they're lying. That's not what I'm doing today. This actually is the most important thing. It is the thing that is most important for me to leave behind as I conclude my ministry here.

Notice how important it is. We've been studying the book of Galatians together since September. Up until now, Paul has dictated the letter through a scribe. But now look at what he says: "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand" (Galatians 6:11). Paul now takes the pen in his own hand and pens the conclusion to this letter.

Now let's pause here. Paul often concludes his letter by signing his own name. It's like a signature. That way the recipients know that the letter really is from him. But this time Paul doesn't just sign his name. He writes a conclusion and summary of the entire book. Notice that he does so in large letters. Why the large letters? Some people guess that it's because of Paul's bad eyesight. That's possible. But it's also possible that Paul is taking the pen in hand at the end of this letter and underlining and highlighting his central message. It's the only time in any of his letters that he provides a concluding summary of his book in this way.

Let me tell you why this is important. One reason is that Paul thinks it's important, and that's a pretty good reason. But let me tell you also that it's important because what he is going to say will make or break this church. What he says in this conclusion will make or break your life, actually. This is vitally important. There is really nothing that is more important than this.

So without further introduction, let's get to what he says. What he says is this: What's most important is that you avoid false gospels, and instead boast in the cross. What is most important for you individually, and you as a church, is two things: that you avoid the false gospel of self-salvation, and that you instead boast only and exclusively in the cross. First: Avoid the false gospel of self-salvation.

The first thing that Paul says as he picks up his pen is that he warns us. He warns us against a tendency that we all have. He warns us of a danger that can and will seep into our churches. The danger is this: that we will want to contribute something to our salvation. The danger is that we will try to add to the gospel, and by doing so will actually subtract from the gospel and end up destroying our souls. It's not that we try to blatantly replace the gospel. We simply add to it. And adding to it destroys it.

A.W. Pink once said, "The greatest mistake made by people is hoping to discover in themselves that which is to be found in Christ alone." Or as Tullian Tchividjian says, "The most dangerous thing that can happen to you is that you become proud of your obedience." Think about that. Our greatest danger, our greatest mistake, is that we look to ourselves and our obedience rather than to Jesus Christ.

How does Paul say this? Look at verses 12-14:

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.

Paul says that there is a counterfeit gospel that will seep into our lives and into our churches. It is one of the greatest dangers we face. The counterfeit gospel is that we think we have to contribute to our own salvation, to our own acceptance with God, through our own efforts. All through Galatians, Paul has been warning against this danger. It's a clear and present danger, and one that seems to be built right into our hearts.

Have you ever driven a car that's out of alignment? The whole time you're driving, the car wants to veer over here. You spend all of your time trying to keep the car on the road. The danger that Paul is talking about is the same. Our hearts are out of alignment and continually want to veer off toward self-salvation. It takes a lot of focus to resist this drift and to keep our eyes on the road.

The danger is that we will try to "make a good showing in the flesh," Paul says. The danger is doing something external that contributes to our salvation. It's doing something that, we think, adds to what Jesus has done in order to earn acceptance with God. In Galatians it's circumcision and keeping the Old Testament law, but we have our own versions as well. John Ortberg writes:

The church I grew up in had its boundary markers. A prideful or resentful pastor could have kept his job, but if ever the pastor was caught smoking a cigarette, he would've been fired. Not because anyone in the church actually thought smoking a worse sin than pride or resentment, but because smoking defined who was in our subculture and who wasn't was a boundary marker.

As I was growing up, having a "quiet time" became a boundary marker, a measure of spiritual growth. If someone had asked me about my spiritual life, I would immediately

think, Have I been having regular and lengthy quiet time? My initial thought was not, Am I growing more loving toward God and toward people?

Boundary markers change from culture to culture, but the dynamic remains the same. If people do not experience authentic transformation, then their faith will deteriorate into a search for the boundary markers that masquerade as evidence of a changed life.

This is the danger: that we will pick some external behavior as our contribution to our salvation. And slowly, without even realizing it, we begin to trust in our own righteousness rather than in the finished work of Christ at the cross.

What's the problem with this? There are two problems. First, Paul says that the motivation is all wrong. The other day, Charlene and I were dividing duties. One of us had to drive one of our kids somewhere and one of us had to help the other one with homework. I didn't really want to go for a drive, but when the options were laid out that clearly – drive or homework – I started looking for my keys. Paul sees the options here as gospel on one hand – trusting Jesus Christ alone for salvation – or some external self-salvation project, and he instantly recognizes that many of us will do anything we can to avoid trusting in Jesus Christ alone. With the Galatians, there was pressure to get Gentiles to measure up to the Jewish law to please Jewish Christians who wouldn't understand. But there is something within all of us that balks at trusting in Jesus Christ alone. Our motivation is wrong. Our motivation is to avoid the harsh truth that there is nothing we can contribute in order to be accepted by God.

There's a second problem. Paul says that those who are pushing for works-righteousness can't themselves keep the standard they're arguing for. "For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law..." We hear about this over and over again. A politician who battles corruption passes new laws, and within a few years is convicted of the very laws that he enacted. A pastor rails against a certain sin, and it eventually comes out that he's secretly been practicing that sin for years. The irony is that the very people who argue for self-salvation are the very same people who don't measure up to their own standards, because none of us do. The churches that have the strictest standards that you need to follow in order to measure up are also the churches that are filled with the biggest hypocrites, because none of us can keep the standards that we set in order to save ourselves.

Please hear me. The greatest danger this church faces is that it will veer off, without knowing it, to a false gospel. Will Willimon said, "Unable to preach Christ and him crucified, we preach humanity and it improved." We're always tempted to substitute a message of self-improvement and self-salvation for the gospel. But this is a false gospel. As Tullian Tchividjian puts it, the only thing that you contribute to your salvation is the sin that made it necessary. That's it. We have nothing but need.

At the end of his letter, Paul picks up his pen to emphasize the importance of avoiding the false gospel of self-salvation. Avoid trying to earn God's approval through your own righteousness.

What does Paul say we should do instead?

Boast exclusively in the cross.

Not only should we avoid the false gospel of self-salvation, but we should also boast exclusively in the cross. This is what's most important. Paul writes:

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. (Galatians 6:14-15)

Last Sunday I woke up with an incredible sense of urgency. I began thinking of all the sermons I've preached here. I can relate to what a preacher said in the novel Gilead:

I think every day about going through those old sermons of mine to see if there are one or two I might want you to read sometime, but there are so many, and I'm afraid, first of all, that most of them might seem foolish or dull to me.

There is not a word in any of those sermons I didn't mean when I wrote it. If I had the time, I could read my way through fifty years of my innermost life. What a terrible thought.

I had a dream once that I was preaching to Jesus Himself, saying any foolish thing I could think of, and He was sitting there in His white, white robe looking patient and sad and amazed. That's what it felt like.

Well, perhaps I can get a box of them down here somehow and do a little sorting. It would put my mind at ease to feel I was leaving a better impression. So often I have known, right here in the pulpit, even as I read these words, how far they fell short of any hopes I had for them. And they were the major work of my life, from a certain point of view. I have to wonder how I have lived with that.

At the end of more than thirteen years, I think back over all the things I've said to you, and all the things that I wish I had said. I wish I could go back and make one thing clear so that it is the great theme of my preaching from beginning to end: that our only confidence, our only boast, our only hope is the saving work of Jesus Christ at the cross. Spurgeon said, "The best sermon is that which is fullest of Christ." He said, "Preach Christ, always and everywhere. He is the whole gospel. His person, offices, and work must be our one great, all-comprehending theme."

To understand this passage, we need to understand three things.

First, we all boast in something. We all boast in something: in some accomplishment, some characteristic, some relationship. We all boast in something. We've all been reading about Kim Jong-il recently. Jong-il, North Korea's "Dear Leader," was presented as larger than life by the media of the Stalinist state.

Reportedly, Kim took daily intensive memory training that involved memorizing huge amounts of information. Kim was quoted as saying, "I remember all computer codes and telephones that workers are using now."

At a meeting in 2002, North Korean officials said they were impressed when Kim recalled all of their phone numbers with "lightning speed."

Kim's memory was not the only amazing attribute he claimed. He wrote operas, piloted jet fighters, and produced movies. While those skills are believable, North Korean propaganda stretched credulity when it stated Kim's golfing prowess. The story goes that the first time he ever played a round of golf, North Korea's leader shot 11 holes-in-one.

We laugh at all of that. We shouldn't. Kim Jong-il's boasts are an extreme version of what we all do. We look to some accomplishment, some talent, to validate our importance, to say that we measure up. The boasts are ridiculous, but we all do it.

Boasting is more than bragging. It is, according to John Stott, "to boast in, glory in, trust in, rejoice in, revel in, love for" something. "The object of our boast or 'glory' fills our horizons, engrosses our attention, and absorbs our time and energy. In a word, our 'glory' is our obsession."

Everybody boasts in something. It could be your popularity, intellect, appearance, influence, income, or job performance. It could be your religious accomplishments. We all boast in something. We all boast in something.

But we also need to understand something else. Our boasting, our obsession, our identity, should ultimately come from one place only: the cross of Jesus Christ. Paul says, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." This is strange. Today we think of the cross as something noble and beautiful. In Paul's day, it was the ugliest thing possible. You couldn't mention the cross in polite society. The Romans considered the cross to be "degrading, disgusting, despicable, detestable, and disgraceful" (Phil Ryken).

But Paul says that this is his boast. Paul looked at the cross and saw that God loved us enough to send his Son to die for us. He looked to the cross and saw his salvation. Christ has paid the full price for our salvation. We've been forgiven and justified. God's wrath has been turned away, and we now stand innocent before God.

Don't boast in anything else. Boast only in the cross. But there's a problem. You can't boast in the cross and yourself at the same time. If you glory in the cross, you have to stop trusting in your own merits and trust in Christ alone. "Only if we have humbled ourselves as hell-deserving sinners shall we give up boasting of ourselves, fly to the cross for salvation and spend the rest of our days glorying in the cross." (John Stott)

So understand that we all boast. Then understand that it only makes sense to boast in one thing: the cross. And then understand what it does to us. When we boast in the cross, it changes everything. Paul says that the world has been crucified to him. The cross completely changes what we value and care about. Tim Keller puts it this way:

The gospel changes what I fundamentally boast in - it changes the whole basis for my identity. Therefore, nothing in the whole world has any power over me - I am free at last to enjoy the world, for I do not need the world. I feel neither inferior to anyone nor superior to anyone, and I am being made all over into someone and something entirely new.

The gospel completely changes what we boast in. It completely changes our identity and values. When the cross grips us, we begin to see it as the only thing that truly matters.

Friends, Paul wants us to get this. At the end of his letter he takes a pen in his hand. He wants us to get what matters most. And this is what he says: don't you ever think it's up to you to measure up. Put all of your confidence, all of your boasting, in what Jesus has done for you. If you're going to brag about anything, brag about Jesus and his saving work.

So that's it. Paul concludes his book with a few simple words:

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.

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

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen. (Galatians 6:15-18)

Here's what he's saying. This is all that matters. From now on, he says, let's not have any more confusion about the gospel. Let nobody bother me with false versions of the gospel, he says. But he's glad to be part of the people of God who get the gospel, and he prays that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ would be with the Galatians as they avoid false gospels and boast in the cross.

I imagine Paul looking at the scroll. Having pointed to Jesus, his job is done. He puts the pen down and gives the nod to his scribe for the letter to be delivered.

Having brought your attention to our great Savior, I can say that I've done what I've been commissioned to do. My only desire is that you would see Jesus. My only desire is that you would glory in the cross; that Christ would be your greatest joy and your deepest glory. And, having done this, my job is done. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.