

STUDIES IN GALATIANS No. 30

Galatians 6:11-18

November 14, 1999

Text Comment

- v.11** It is possible, though perhaps not likely, that Paul is referring to the entire letter as having been written in his own hand. That was not later his usual custom. It is more likely that Paul, having dictated the letter to this point, writes the last few sentences with his own hand. In 2 Thessalonians 3:17, at the very end of another early letter, Paul wrote: “I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write.” That is, his own hand at the very end of the letter was a way of authenticating it as being from him.

All sorts of suggestions have been made to explain why Paul would have written with large letters. One scholar suggests, most implausibly in my view, that Paul had actually been crucified at some point during his Galatian ministry (he mentions being crucified with Christ in 2:20 and 6:14) and that, as a result, his hand had been permanently damaged, which made writing difficult. Others, including some church fathers, supposed that Paul wrote in large letters for emphasis. Especially insofar as what follows is a brief summary of the entire letter, this personally handwritten section would be like bold or underlined type. More commonly, it is supposed that Paul suffered from poor eyesight, and like all people who do, he wrote larger so as to be able to see what he wrote.

- v.12** Paul returns to the charges he made in the body of the letter. While he is concerned for the Spirit’s work within his converts and that Christ be formed in them, that is, in the new creation as he will say in v. 15, the judaizers are concerned only with external conformity and the advancement of their own reputation. In fact, their primary motive for seeking to persuade the Galatians to be circumcised is to avoid persecution themselves. They want to be accepted by the Jewish community, their own community, even that large part of it that has not accepted Christ as the Messiah. They are unwilling to face the hardship, the rejection required of those who follow Christ wholly. If they could persuade the Gentile converts to be circumcised – after all, Jews had long welcomed proselytes to Judaism who proved their new allegiance by undergoing circumcision – the Christian church, in Jerusalem and elsewhere, would be spared the reprisals from the Jews that had fallen upon it in Jerusalem and, as we know from Acts 13-14, even in Galatia.

And it would be, in that case, an unwillingness to be persecuted for the cross’ sake because it was precisely the cross and the message of the cross that the Jews found so foolish and so contemptible, precisely because it amounted to a theory of salvation different than obedience to the Mosaic and Rabbinical law. Those who did not demand circumcision of Gentile converts obviously were operating on a different theory of how sinners were made right with God than the theory that prevailed in the Judaism of that day (and in this day, for that matter). Yet these judaizers were Christians by their own profession. They wanted to find some middle ground: faith in Christ plus the works of the

law, especially a few of those laws – those like circumcision that defined Jewish piety and spiritual culture.

- v.13** Paul's point seems to be a recapitulation of the point he made in 5:3. The judaizers who demand circumcision ("those favoring circumcision" is probably a better reading of the participle than the NIV's "those who are circumcised") under a theory of works-righteousness can't stop there. They are obliged to keep all of God's law, and that from the heart, which, of course they do not. A point the Lord Jesus made in talking to and about the Pharisees on many occasions. The judaizers are simply the Christian form of the Pharisees and they are just as hypocritical, for their obedience is all external conformity, not inward loyalty to the true meaning and intention of God's law – which is why they can actually believe that they keep the law well enough to win their peace with God by it. The Gentiles they persuade to be circumcised are for them, notches on their gun, like the number of people that Jehovah's Witnesses bear witness to. They are the proof of the judaizers' zeal for the law.
- v.14** Paul has a different sort of boasting in mind for himself. I'm going to return to this verse next Lord's Day evening in our final study in Galatians.
- v.15** As we noted in commenting on 5:6, Paul uses this expression, "neither circumcision or uncircumcision matters but..." three times, twice in Galatians and also in 1 Corinthians 7:19. The comparison in each case is different: in Galatians 5:6 it is "but faith expressing itself through love"; here it is "what counts is the new creation"; and in 1 Corinthians 7:19, strikingly, it is "but keeping the commandments of God." He has just said, however, that the judaizers *don't* keep the law of God. In any case, "faith expressing itself through love," "the new creation," and "keeping the commandments of God," apparently amount largely to the same thing in Paul's mind. But it is striking, all the more in this letter, for Paul to say that, the question of circumcision *per se* is not important. It is only crucial when the practice is allied to a works-righteousness theory of justification. Circumcision in and of itself contributes nothing to one's peace with God – circumcised people don't have that peace and uncircumcised people do and *vice versa*. What counts is the supernatural work of grace by which, in Christ, men and women are transformed into new creatures by the Holy Spirit. "New" in Paul always has reference to the new life of the Spirit in contrast to the old life of the flesh, the self, and of bondage to sin. It has the same idea as Paul's "old man/new man" contrast in Romans 6; Ephesians 4; and Colossians 3. As always before, of course, the new creation will find its consummation only in the future, but is already present in principle and real power in the life of those who are united to Christ, as it always had been.
- v.16** The rule is of course the principle of justification by Christ and by faith, not by works. Paul is pronouncing God's blessing upon all such. They shall know the peace of God, not those who persist in betraying the gospel by a return to the principle of justification by works.

"The Israel of God" surely ought to be taken in keeping with the theology of the letter, in which, all who believe are the sons of Abraham or are the descendants of Sarah (chapter

4), even, in which, in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile. Here, then, all those who follow the gospel rule are the Israel of God. “We are the circumcision” Paul wrote to a largely Gentile church in Philippi. Your forefathers were brought through the Red Sea, he told a largely Gentile church in Corinth. In Ephesians 2:12 he says to the Gentile Christians in the church there, “at one time you were separated from citizenship in Israel...” but, of course, they are no longer, since they believed in Christ. The Israel of God is the true church of God, the people of God, whether Jews or Gentiles.

- v.17** In contrast to the mark of circumcision, Paul bears in his body the marks of his loyalty to Jesus, the scars – perhaps the very ones he received when beaten and stoned in these same Galatian cities – that prove that he is Jesus’ servant and loyal to his master. The thought seems to be that, as Christ’s true apostle, the opposition to him and to his message is really an opposition to Christ himself.
- v.18** A very typical Pauline benediction as the conclusion. The “brothers” is an added touch. For example, this final verse is almost identical to Philippians 4:23 except for the addition of “brothers.” But it is an important addition here: a final encouraging word. He believes them his brothers; he expects that, therefore, they will heed his appeal and remain true to the gospel.

As I said before, if you take Galatians as the earliest of Paul’s letters, written before the Jerusalem Council reported in Acts 15, which makes the most sense by far to me and is the conclusion of much of evangelical scholarship, then Paul will visit these churches at least twice more and without any further report of instability or the inroads of heresy. That leaves us with the natural assumption that *Galatians* did its work, by the Spirit of God, arrested the theological decay, and restored the churches to true gospel faith and life. In any case, after the catastrophe of A.D. 70, the Jewish presence and influence in the church declined precipitously and then virtually disappeared. After that, circumcision and other Jewish regulations became irrelevant in the almost universally Gentile church.

In his own hand, then, Paul concluded his great letter, and in a few words recapitulated the main argument: the choice is Christ or a principle of self-salvation, and it makes it no less a principle of self-salvation if Christ is still given some place in it. It is either Christ only, and the cross only, or it is works and self. The gospel has always been Christ only and his righteousness received by faith alone – which is only another way of saying the same thing as salvation by Christ alone – and it will always be so. And, this message is so contrary to the native theology of the human heart that it will always be necessary to restate the message of grace and faith alone. The church will always be subject to the danger of losing the gracious character of the gospel.

In that respect, the Roman Catholic Church and the liberal Protestant churches are the most predictable of Christian phenomena. Just as Israel couldn’t keep free grace in its head for more than a few months at a time, it seems, so the Christian church hasn’t been able to either. Similarly, it is entirely predictable that there should have been a Reformation and that it should have been sparked by the rediscovery of the message of Galatians and Romans, viz. the message of justification by faith and not by religious works. It is a message of remarkable power, breath-

taking originality, unique freshness, that, when discovered breaths an entirely new life into religion and religious feeling.

And in conservative, Bible-believing churches it is the same, though in a different form. Legalism is an ever-present danger, because it is the default position of the human heart in sin. It is the preferred theology of sinners, of rebels, and of the lovers of themselves, all of which we are, you and I, in spades.

But Paul in the gospel replies to all of that insidious tendency on our part somehow to make a righteousness for ourselves, to maintain some place for pride before God and man, to consider ourselves at least sufficiently better than others to indulge the illusion in our hearts that there is that in us that God finds attractive and that accounts for his approval. “Why,” says Paul, “the idea that man could be made right with God on the basis of his own trivial good works, loaded with sin as even they are, is like imagining that a man could make it in this world using monopoly money. Isaiah called our righteousness, the righteousness we have by ourselves, the goodness we manufacture from within ourselves, “filthy rags.” Paul, in Philippians, calls it “dung.” Only one righteousness can carry us to heaven: the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, which is reckoned to us as if it were ours when we believe in him.

As Richard Hooker, the famous “judicious” Hooker, *the* theologian of the Anglican church, wrote in his famous sermon on justification by faith,

“Let it be counted folly, or phrenzy, or fury, or whatsoever, it is our wisdom and our comfort. We care for no other knowledge in the world but this: “that man hath sinned and God hath suffered: that God hath made himself the sin of man, and that men are made the righteousness of God.”

Concerning which words Alexander Whyte then said, “For my part, let it be counted folly, or frenzy, or fury, or whatsoever, I think I would rather have written those heavenly lines than all the rest of the English language taken together.” [*Thomas Shepard*, 160]

And, as we have seen in just these last verses of the book, where Paul brings in the idea of a new creation as part and parcel of what he has been arguing in respect to justification, so elsewhere he demonstrates that justification by faith is simply one way of looking at the Bible’s doctrine of salvation by grace alone and by God alone and by the renewing power and work of the Holy Spirit alone, and by the work of Christ for us alone. It is all of a single piece. Justification, as an explanation of forgiveness, means the same thing as election, as predestination, as regeneration, as effectual calling – all in one way or another show us a salvation that is all God’s doing and not our own and in which we are always only responding to what God has done for us and in us.

Let me finish by summarizing for you the “advantages” and “disadvantages” of the doctrine of justification by faith alone as these are given in a classic work on justification by the Scottish divine, Robert Traill, a work originally published in 1692.

First the *ADVANTAGES*:

1. It is a doctrine loved by the godly; it makes sense to them. And the more spiritually healthy they are, the more they love it.
2. It is the only doctrine – this doctrine of justification by faith – that adequately meets the needs of an awakened conscience and a convinced sinner. “Against the greatness of his sins, the curse of the law, and the severity of God as Judge, there is no relief to be held forth to him, but the free and boundless grace of God in the merit of Christ’s satisfaction by the sacrifice of himself.” [267-268]
3. The doctrine of free justification suits people’s spirits and frame in their approach to God in worship. “Men may think and talk boldly of inherent righteousness...of good works...and dispositions; but when men present themselves before the Lord, and have any discoveries of his glory, all things in themselves will disappear, and be looked on as nothing.” “No man can stand before this holy Lord God, with any peace and comfort, unless he have God himself to stay upon.” [269]
4. Justification by Christ, that is by faith, without any mixture of human effort in it, is the only basis on which men and women can make a plea to God when they are dying. “Consider how it is with the most holy and eminent saints when they are dying. Did [you] ever see or hear any boasting of their works and performances?” “...when they draw near to the awful tribunal, what else is in their eye and heart, but only free grace, ransoming blood, and a well-ordered covenant in Christ the Surety?” “It is a great test of the truth of the doctrine about the way of salvation, when it is generally approved of by sensible dying men.”

Then the *DISADVANTAGES*:

1. The doctrine is a spiritual mystery and does not easily submit to natural understanding. A man naturally understands working for life; but not believing for life. To fix the old man he understands; to put on a new man by faith he does not. There is, in fact, much in the doctrine that men do not like, especially its assumption that men are so bad they cannot contribute to their own standing with God and that even their best works are not adequate to stand by themselves in the judgment of God. It is precisely this unnatural fit of the doctrine that has led so many ministers through the ages to fashion a doctrine more congenial to human tastes and more easily understood and embraced by everyone.
2. Those who do not favor justification by faith far outnumber those who do. And that is as true of religious people as irreligious.
3. There are a variety of arguments reason advances against the doctrine of free justification (it is antinomian and promotes loose living; it is too exclusive; etc.).
4. It is contrary to the spirit of the day (so Traill in 1692!). How much more today! We live in a day that takes law and judgment as of little consequence; has a hard time believing in sin and guilt, and is much impressed by trivial good works. Justification as taught in the Bible requires a completely different foundation to be appreciated and believed. It is no accident that there appears a Protestant/Catholic rapprochement at just the time the Protestant

evangelical church is losing a sense of the seriousness of sin and is coming to have the trivial view of sin that has so long prevailed in Roman Catholic thought. Without a biblical reckoning with sin and guilt, judgment and hell (Neuhaus thinks there is a hell but it is empty!), justification by faith will not impress people. It will seem like far too extreme a remedy for a relatively minor problem.

We can say this further thing about justification by faith – it is the understanding of salvation and peace with God that gives the greatest glory to Jesus Christ and lays most on the love of God. That is surely another great argument on its behalf. We will talk more about that in our concluding study, next Lord's Day evening.