THE CROSS OF CHRIST

Galatians 6:1-18
Key Verse 6:14

“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.”

In the last passage, we learned that as the children of God, we are free indeed to bear the fruits of the Spirit, including love, joy and peace. How wonderful it is to grow in love and joy and peace day after day! It is like paradise to live by the Spirit, and to live with others who live by the Spirit, too. How terrible it is to live with those who are only bearing the fruit of the sinful nature. Praise God who gives his children the gift of the Holy Spirit, and enables us to grow in love, joy and peace day after day! In today’s passage, Paul teaches his Galatian sheep what they must do as the children of God. The Christian life is by faith in what Jesus has done for us on the cross. The Christian life is the fruit of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts. But there is something we must do while living as pilgrims on earth pressing forward to the kingdom of God. May God bless us to learn from this passage to take pride in the cross of Christ, and do what is right for the sake of our hope in the harvest that is to come.

I. The law of Christ (1-10)

Paul’s message to the Galatians has been crystal clear. To trust in the law is to become a prisoner of sin. The law cannot save us, and the law cannot make us righteous before God. To depend on the law is to reject the salvation we already have just by believing in Jesus. Through faith in Jesus we have the promise of an inheritance in the kingdom of God. Through faith in Jesus we have the Spirit of God’s Son working in us to make us into a new creation. Through faith in Jesus, we can obey the law of God – “love your neighbor as yourself.” Therefore, we must not be deceived by our weak consciences and return to slavery through ritual observance of the law. We must live by faith in Jesus from first to last. However, there was a danger that young Christians might become pointless, thinking that “by faith” meant “no effort.” Therefore, in the final chapter of his letter, Paul gives the Galatians several practical rules to guide them as they lived as the children of God in a dark world.

First, carry each others’ burdens (1-2). In Paul’s teachings to the Galatians, he speaks about our personal responsibilities as well as our responsibilities to others. However, contrary to our expectation, he speaks about our responsibilities to others first. In this way, Paul emphasizes that in Christian life, others come first, before ourselves. Look at verses 1 and 2. “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may become tempted. Carry each others’ burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Here, Paul lays down the rule that Christians are responsible to help one another when we fall, and to carry one another’s burdens. To be responsible for another person is not easy. One young man invited his younger brother to come and live with him, promising him that he would take good care of him. He thought that to be responsible for his brother meant to have a car and a job and enough money. But he found out that being responsible for him also meant somehow helping him to be happy. So he has suffered a lot, having no experience at making anyone else happy. Several years ago, one student lived at our house as our prayer for him to get out of a life of sin and grow as a disciple of Jesus. We took care of many things for him. When he broke the garage and the car door, we covered his debt. But
in order for him to grow, I had to listen to him endlessly, and always set a good example for him. However, I was too busy with my job and too selfish to spend enough time with him. Eventually, he ran away and began living as a street bum. By God’s grace, he has recently made a decision to return to Bible study and a life by the Spirit. But before he left, he told us, “Sometimes, I just have to be cruel.” Helping other people is not easy. Helping other people makes us vulnerable and exposes our weaknesses. Sometimes, instead of influencing them, they influence us and we get worse. What a difficult command Paul gives us! But, as Paul declares, this command is the law of Christ. Even though it is difficult, we help our families and our children because we know that it is our responsibility. We have a commitment to them, just by virtue of our common blood. The law of Christ is that, by virtue of our common faith in the blood of Jesus, we have a commitment to all believers, to help them and carry one another in difficult times, like brothers.

Second, carry your own load (3-5). When St. Paul instructs believers in verse 5, “...each one should carry his own load,” he does not mean that we should take care of ourselves, first. What does “carry your own load” mean in a Christian community? Look at verses 3 and 4. “If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else.” Human beings are very interesting. We are completely selfish and ignorant of others’ needs. But when it comes to our work, we take far more interest in how well someone else is doing his job, than in how we are performing the work we must do. It means, we are lazy, and use others’ laziness and weakness to justify our own. Such an attitude breeds division among the body of believers, and cannot build the body up. Therefore, Paul instructs the believers to forget about comparing yourself to others. Our responsibility is to test ourselves by examining our own actions in the light of God’s truth. Did I carry anyone’s burdens today? Did I restore someone in their faith? Did I act in faith, or out of legalism and a desire to please men? When we test ourselves in this way, our consciences, prompted by the Spirit of Jesus, will rebuke or commend us according to the truth of what we have actually done. Each Christian has a load they must carry for the sake of building up the body of believers and fulfilling the world salvation purpose of God. We cannot take up that load by looking at others and comparing ourselves with others. We must examine ourselves, and strive to make progress in our own actions. Therefore, each Christian should study the Bible personally and intensively, and struggle to apply what he has learned through writing repentant testimonies based on the Bible study. In this way, each one can make progress and fulfill the law of Christ as it applies to his own life. Even St. Peter wanted to compare his mission with that of St. John, asking Jesus, “Lord, what about him?” But the Risen Jesus told Peter, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me” (Jn. 21:22). May God bless each of you to take up your own cross and follow Jesus through personal Bible study and sincere repentance in testimony writing before the word of God.

Third, bless your teacher (6). Look at verse 6. “Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.” Here, Paul is not instituting a welfare program for Bible teachers. Instead, Paul wants each believer to recognize the debt we owe because of the gift of the gospel and the shepherding of our souls by God’s servants. There is a funny story about a shepherd and his sheep. The sheep is a kind of permanent student at a community college near Chicago. The shepherd is a kind of genius in analysis and writing as a graduate from the College of Journalism at Northwestern University. The shepherd helped his sheep for more than 5 hours to write one paper for
his class. Then, the shepherd drove the sheep home, which was about an hour out of his way. On the way, the sheep asked to stop at a donut shop, where he bought a single donut and ate it in front of his shepherd. Then, they went home. Sheep, like children toward their mommies, expect their shepherds to make many sacrifices in order to bless them. But sheep should learn to be thankful, and grow as shepherds themselves, instead of only remaining permanent sheep, eating donuts in front of their hungry shepherds!

Fourth, the law of Christ (7-10). Paul summarizes his teaching on the “law of Christ” by warning the Galatians that God is not mocked. It means that we cannot pull the wool over God’s eyes by pretending to believe. God judges our faith by its fruit. Those who live to please the sinful nature will be exposed as hypocrites and unbelievers by their fruit, and they will reap destruction. Those who live to please the Spirit will be commended by our Lord Jesus Christ when he comes again, and will receive the inheritance promised to those who believe (Mt 25:31-40). So we must humble ourselves and tremble before our Savior, Jesus Christ, that our faith might be found genuine when he comes again. But our hope in him is not in vain. Look at verses 9 and 10. “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” To live by faith is to live in order to please God’s Spirit, in the hope that we will receive the promised inheritance. In so doing, we will fulfill a higher law than even the Ten Commandments, the “law of Christ.”

II. The Cross of Christ (11-18)

At this point in his letter, Paul takes the pen away from his scribe, and begins to write to the Galatians directly, that they might know that it is he himself who is speaking to them. Paul has been in consternation over the Galatians because they were so easily led astray by the false apostles. He feared that, in spite of everything, they might stumble and fall in their vain attempt to gain a righteousness of their own. He was at a loss to convince them any further that the gospel they had received from him was sufficient for their salvation and to ensure them an inheritance as the children of God. Therefore, Paul turned away from his arguments, and looked squarely at Jesus on the cross.

First, may I boast in the cross of Christ (12-16). Look at verses 12 and 13. “Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh.” In these verses, Paul exposes the hypocrisy of the circumcision group. They promoted circumcision to please men. But their own lives showed that circumcision was fruitless without the Spirit. Having the law and strict codes gives us the appearance of righteousness, but it is just an appearance. In Russia under communism, there was an appearance of law and order, even though the government itself was criminal in its abuse of its own population and of others. Paul says that these men held on to their hypocrisy in order to avoid persecution for the cross of Christ. Historically speaking, the early Christians were intimidated by the Jewish leaders into maintaining Christianity as a subset of Judaism. Even though they knew that it was the cross of Christ alone which had purchased their freedom from sin, they felt compelled to make others, the Gentile believers, be circumcised in order to please the
Jews. To promote circumcision was to avoid persecution. But Paul sees a deeper meaning in their devotion to the rite of circumcision. They were not willing to come fully to the cross of Jesus, and lay down all their confidence in the flesh at the foot of the cross. They were unwilling to let go of their self-confidence. They were still worldly, and under the control of the sinful nature.

But what was Paul’s testimony? “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.” Paul had been a Jew’s Jew, a Pharisee and a rising young star among the elders and chief priests of Jerusalem. His devotion to the law and scrupulous attention to detail were matchless. But it was all garbage to Paul, compared to Jesus’ cross. In fact, all of his ability and intelligence had only made him an enemy of God. When the Risen Jesus came to him and said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5), Paul was revealed as a murderer, hypocrite, liar and a servant of the devil. The sentence for his crimes had to be death. But Jesus did not come to Paul to condemn him, but to save him and make him an apostle of Christ and a light to the Gentiles. Paul had thought that it was right to condemn Jesus to death and let him suffer on the cross for his blasphemy. But when the Risen Christ appeared to him, he found that Christ had died on the cross for him, to take the burden of Paul’s sins on himself, so that Paul may not die, but live forever in the kingdom of God. In the cross of Jesus, Paul found everything. He found the righteousness of God which will never make peace with sin. He also found the mercy of God, which compelled him to sacrifice his own Son for the sake of sinners. Now, the cross of Jesus stood as reminder of everything that God had done for him through Christ. The cross of Jesus became the dividing line in Paul’s life. Through the cross, Paul was cut off from his past way of life. To go back was to forget God’s sacrifice and God’s grace, and he couldn’t do it. In effect, his sinful nature was “nailed” to the cross, still alive, but powerless. When the sinful nature lost its power to control him, then Paul found himself for the first time to be free to live to please God. He became a new creation, “an instrument of righteousness” (Ro. 6:13). Circumcision could never do what the cross of Jesus did. So Paul could never promote circumcision or boast of his own or another’s flesh. His message was the same for Gentiles and Jews alike, “come to the cross of Jesus, and there lay down your burden of sin, and let the Spirit of Jesus give birth in you to a new creation as an instrument of righteousness.” Let us not avoid the cross because it looks painful or requires us to let go of our worldly pride and glory. Let us come to Jesus and let the cross impale our sinful nature and make us free to live as the holy children of God.

Second, I bear on my body the marks of Jesus (17-18). Paul’s faith and confidence in the cross of Jesus were not mere words. He had indeed suffered time and again in order to carry his own load and live up to Jesus’ calling to him to be a light to the Gentiles. But he was not bitter at having to suffer for the sake of Jesus. The stonings and beatings he endured seemed like mild cases of the flu compared to the glory that was his at the harvest to come.

In this passage, we learned that the law of Christ is to do good to all people as the expression of our hope in the harvest to come. May God help you to come to Jesus’ cross newly, until your sinful nature is nailed there and you become a new creation, one who fulfills the law of Christ.