

## “The Flesh or The Cross”

May 18, 2025

Galatians 6:11-18

### I. Introduction

Today we come to the conclusion of Paul’s letter to the Galatian churches. Ordinarily, Paul dictated his letter to a scribe (called an amanuensis *aman u en sis*) and just added a short benediction and signature. But he was so concerned that the Galatians get the message of this letter that he wrote an entire concluding paragraph with a minimum of personal greetings. Some feel that the Greek words imply that he wrote the *whole* letter “with my own hand.”

Whether he wrote the whole letter or just the closing paragraph, Paul’s writing with “large letters” could mean a variety of things. It may have meant that he had poor eyesight. Eye problems could mean that he would have to write in large letters so that he would be able to read what he was writing. Some feel that Paul’s thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 was some kind of eye problem. A second possibility is that he wrote with “large letters” to emphasize what he was writing—like using italicized or bold print today. Either way, Paul was making it clear that he had something important to write—that he wasn’t simply going to end his letter in the normal way.

One last time Paul contrasted legalism with grace; the flesh with the Cross. It wasn’t just a matter of “different doctrine,” but a matter of two different ways of life. Paul echoed Joshua’s words from Joshua 24:15, “If serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourself this day whom you will serve.” They had to choose between the flesh or the cross. Paul began by reviewing three characteristics of the Judaizers or legalism—the flesh.

### II. Characteristics of Legalism – The Flesh

A. First, they are motivated by pride. Paul wrote that they “want to make a good impression outwardly.” The main purpose of the Judaizers wasn’t to win people to Christ or even help believers grow in grace. Their chief purpose was to impress others by outward legalism and by the number of converts they had made. Their work wasn’t done for the good of the church or for the glory of God; it was done for their

own glory. They were motivated by pride. Jesus warned about religious pride in [Matthew 6:1-18](#); in the 1<sup>st</sup> verse, Jesus said, “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” [Turn to Luke 16:14-15](#). Since He can see the hearts of man, God isn’t impressed by outward actions.

As proof of their “*religiousness*,” the Judaizers tried “to compel” others in the churches “to be circumcised” as a necessary act for salvation. Speaking of such an attitude, Jesus said in [Matthew 23:4](#) “They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders.” In their fleshly natures, the legalists boasted with pride about those they snared and forced to be circumcised and adhere to Law.

**B. They are motivated by fear.** As well as being motivated by pride, Paul wrote that legalists are also motivated by fear, he wrote: “The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted.” Because Paul preached the grace of God and salvation without works, he *was* persecuted by the legalists as well as the world. But the Judaizers—the legalists—were not willing to pay the price of persecution in order to be identified with Jesus Christ. They would use His name and attend His church only if there was no offense to those around them. And most of the offense could be avoided if they denied the cross and the meaning of Christ’s death.

Today the cross is a symbol of love—God’s love for mankind—and the sign of a follower of Jesus Christ. But in Paul’s day, it stood for rejection and shame. The cross was the lowest form of death and the ultimate humiliation—this is why [1 Corinthians 1:23](#) says, “But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” The Judaizers identified themselves with the church but not with the cross. They had no allegiance to “the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The Cross and what it stood for just caused problems. Their concern was for their safety and ease, not their salvation. They hoped that by following the Mosaic Laws and teaching circumcision, they would be protected from persecution. They are motivated by fear.

**C. They are motivated by hypocrisy.** Paul then wrote in [verse 13](#): “Not even those who are circumcised obey the law.” This is the third characteristic of legalism: they are motivated by hypocrisy. Hypocrisy and

fear go hand-in-hand. If a person were not afraid of what other people might say or do, he would have no reason for pretending to be something he is not.

Although they were circumcised, the Judaizers didn't try to live by the standards of the Law. They had no intention of keeping the Law, even if they could. They performed the easy, outward surgery on each other, but never lived out the rest of God's Law. Their reverence for the Law was only a smoke screen to cover their real goal—winning more converts to their cause. They wanted to report more statistics and get more glory for themselves. Turn to Matthew 23 where Jesus addressed this same attitude—turn to Matthew 23:1-7. The Judaizers—the legalists weren't ready to follow Jesus' admonition in Luke 9:23, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." They were hypocrites. Paul then turned to the characteristics of grace and the cross.

### III. Characteristics of Grace and The Cross

**A. It is through Jesus Christ.** The praise of the Judaizers was for and about themselves. Paul's praise was "in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul didn't boast in himself; he boasted in a crucified and risen Savior. This is the first characteristic of grace—it is through Jesus Christ. Paul boasted or gloried in the cross because it was the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross that is the source of his and every believer's righteousness and acceptance by God through grace—2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." The cross reminds us—Christians—of Jesus' sacrifice that provides redemption and eternal life for all who believe.

No matter how good a person manages to be in his own strength, he falls short of the moral and spiritual perfection that God requires—in Matthew 5:48 Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." But Romans 3:23 says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Only through Jesus Christ and His work on the cross is perfection made available to those who believe and are graciously given the perfect righteousness of God. 1 Peter 2:24 says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."

**B. It gives freedom.** A second characteristic of grace is: it gives freedom. It gives freedom from self—Galatians 2:20 says, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” It gives freedom from the sinful nature or the flesh—Galatians 5:24 says, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.” It gives freedom from the world—in verse 14 of today’s Scripture Paul wrote, “The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” The person who belongs to Jesus Christ is freed from the world’s evil and hopelessness. As we yield to Christ, we have victory over the world and the sinful nature; 1 John 5:4 says, “For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” When a person receives Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, sin becomes a dead issue, the law becomes a dead issue, and the world becomes a dead issue. The legalist inflates the ego, flatters the flesh, and pleases the world; the true Christian crucifies all three. He is free of all three.

**C. Third, there is a new creation.** Paul wrote that for the Jew, circumcision wasn’t important; for the Gentile, uncircumcision didn’t mean anything—salvation and righteousness are only through the power of the Cross. In John 3:3 Jesus told Nicodemus, “No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” Through grace and the power of the cross, there is a new creation. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” The “old creation” was headed by Adam, and it ended in failure. The new creation is headed by Christ, and it is going to succeed. As a “new creation,” man is fit for fellowship with his heavenly Father and for citizenship in his heavenly home.

**D. Finally, because of grace and the Cross, Paul wrote that there is salvation for all who follow this rule.** This is the rule of the Gospel—turn to John 3:16-18. Acts 16:31 puts it this way: Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” This is the RULE: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus’ sacrifice—salvation—is for all people—Jews and Gentiles. Galatians 3:28 says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all are one in Christ Jesus.” 2 Peter 3:9 says that God “is patient with

you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to have eternal life.” Man cannot change the terms of salvation, but he can refuse the terms to his eternal sorrow.

Peace and mercy represent salvation which follows after one makes Jesus his Lord and Savior. Peace refers to the believer’s new relationship to God. Mercy refers to the divine removal of the believer’s sins. Peace is the positive side of salvation—a new and right relationship established with God. Mercy deals with the negative side—the forgiving of all a believer’s sins and the setting aside of his judgment.

Paul closed his letter by reminding his readers of all the scars he had received and the sufferings he had endured in the service of Jesus Christ. **Turn to 2 Corinthians 11:23b-28.** Thinking of the hypocrisy of the legalists, it’s almost as if Paul were saying, *“If you are impressed with bodily affliction for the Lord’s sake, look at the marks of Jesus I bear on my body.”* Even in his closing words, Paul emphasized grace over law, faith over works, the internal over the external: **“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.”**

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In Galatians we see two approaches to salvation—there are only two. There is the grace/faith/Spirit religion called Christianity, and there is the law/works/flesh religion which identifies all the rest. God’s way is the way of grace, working through man’s faith in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ on the Cross and the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit. **Ephesians 2:8-9** summarizes it this way, **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”**

All the other ways are a law/works/flesh religion. No matter how different they may seem to be, they are all an attempt at salvation through fleshly works of the law. No matter how much it may claim to be Christian, no religion that relies on flesh and promotes religious conceit has any part of Christ. No act, no ritual, no ceremony, no poverty of the body, no self-inflicted sacrifice can add the smallest value to what Christ has done. Just like going to the supermarket, the religion of human achievement is packaged in different sizes, shapes, and colors, but they are all the same—they are based on works righteousness, seeking

to please God by various forms and methods of human merit and human effort. But [Romans 3:20](#) says, “No one will be declared righteous in his, i.e., God’s, sight by observing the law, rather through the law we become conscious of sin.” Only Christianity doesn’t rely on personal achievement but on the work of Jesus Christ and the mercy and grace of God. Sadly, legalism is popular; the grace of God is unpopular.

Unfortunately, many have bought into either the Mosaic system or the world’s system. Many people, including misled Christians, say that as long as a person is sincere in his or her beliefs, or as long as he tries his best, that person will be OK. That’s not what the Bible says, e.g., [John 3:36](#) says, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” [Romans 6:23](#) says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” There is only one way to heaven—in [John 14:6](#) Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

We must be careful that the world doesn’t infect us. There is nothing wrong with wanting to win people to Christ, or to see the work of the Lord increase. It’s nice seeing and hearing 50+ people in a morning worship service but it is definitely wrong to want these blessings for the glory of man—for our glory—for our pride. We want to see more people sharing in our services, not so that we can count people, but because people count in God’s eyes. A good work can be spoiled by a bad motive. We must be careful that we don’t do things or not do things because of fear of what others might say or do. As Peter and the other apostles told the Sanhedrin—the Jewish Supreme Court—in [Acts 5:29](#): “We must obey God rather than man.” We must be careful that we don’t just listen to God’s word and be hypocrites-- [James 1:22](#) says, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” The question that we have been asked several times throughout Galatians is this: “Why do you do what you do?” What is your choice—“The Flesh or The Cross”?

Let me close with Pauls’ words from [Colossians 3:1-3](#): “Since ~~then~~, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”