

FINAL WORDS
GALATIANS 6:11-18

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

People are often remembered for their last words. Sometimes they are remembered for their famous last words. Consider these famous last words. Daniel Webster was a New England Congressman, lawyer, and Secretary of State in three different administrations. He once supposedly declared, **“I have never heard of anything more ridiculous, more absurd than the claim that the nation will profit by the acquisition of _____. I contend it is not worth \$1.”** Any guess about what was in consideration for Congress to acquire? (California)

Decca Records was a dominant force in the music industry for several decades. The people they had under contract included Judy Garland, Bing Crosby, Louis Armstrong, and Buddy Holly. They turned down the opportunity to sign this group, with the comment: **“We don’t like their sound. And besides, guitar music is on the way out.”** What was the group? (Beatles, 1962, Wikipedia)

Yale economist Irving Fisher was quoted in the pages of the *New York Times* (9/6/1929) saying, **“...the stock market has reached what looks like a permanently high plateau. The market is a safe and prudent investment.”** Any guess about what year that prediction was made? (1929)

There was a businessman by the name of Thomas Watson, Sr., who in 1953 made this assessment: **“There is no reason to risk our success on such a limited venture.”** Any guess about what that business venture was? (making computers, he was chairman of IBM, there is dispute about the origin of that quotation)

We are about to consider the last words of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians, which have indeed become famous. The last known written correspondence of Paul was Second Timothy. The last words of that last letter are **“Grace be with you.”** The last verse of this letter has the same theme: **“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.”** Grace was a big deal to the Apostle Paul.

Grace is a big deal to Christianity and to Jesus Christ. According to some sources the last words of Buddha were **“Strive without ceasing.”** According to the Gospel of John the last words of Jesus were **“It is finished.”** (John 19:30) In Greek it is one word *tetelestai*. The theological issue at stake is: What is necessary for eternal salvation? Must we strive without ceasing, or has eternal salvation been accomplished? Did the death of Jesus on the cross accomplish all that is necessary to secure our salvation, or is there something more that we must do to earn it?

The message of Galatians is that the death of Jesus on the cross paid the penalty for the sins of mankind. The one responsibility which we humans have to enter into the benefits of that is to trust in Jesus and what He accomplished in His death for us. In #2 v. 16 Paul wrote that we are **“justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law...”**

The human tendency is to add rules and requirements to that simple responsibility to trust in Jesus. So it is that the Jews who claimed to be Christians went to Galatia and tried to convince the Gentile followers of Jesus that they also needed to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses and the additional rules that the rabbis had added over the centuries. So it is that down through Christian history people have come along saying that you have to believe in Jesus and belong to this particular church. You have to be baptized. You have to walk down an aisle. You have to believe in Jesus plus believe in the pope or Joseph Smith or Charles Taze Russell or Mary Baker Eddy. You have to believe in Jesus plus give up these particular sins or give x amount of money.

The Apostle Paul gave one of the clearest explanations of the gospel (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 2:8-9B) in Ephesians #2 vv. 8 & 9. There he wrote, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”** Such is the nature of the gospel of grace. We come then today to Paul’s final words to the Galatians. In them we find a summary of the main themes which he wanted to communicate to them and which we need to grasp as well.

I.

In vv. 11-13 we find THE FINAL WORD ON JUDAIZERS AND LAW KEEPING. (I. THE FINAL WORD ON JUDAIZERS...) The apostle writes in v. 11, **“See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.”** It is possible that Paul wrote out this letter himself. Some commentators suggest that Paul was so upset about the situation in Galatia when he heard about these Judaizers that he sat down and wrote the letter himself.

The more common practice in the Greco-Roman world was to have a scribe write out a letter in careful Greek script. Most commentators thus suspect that it was just this verse, or perhaps the last few verses, that Paul wrote out himself. His distinct style perhaps served as an authentication that he actually composed this letter. It is clear that in many of his other letters Paul used such a secretary, called an amanuensis, to actually put his words down on paper--- or papyrus or vellum.

Some students of the Scripture interpret the reference to large letters to be an indication that Paul had an eye problem. He had to write large letters in order to see what he was doing. That is possible, but it may just be that Paul used larger letters than in the rest of his letter to show that he was intervening at this point to show that he really was the author of the letter.

According to v. 12, **“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.”** Paul is again referring to the Judaizers, the Jewish people who claimed to be Christians who tried to convince the Gentile Christians that they had to adopt Judaism in order to be fully right with God. The key sign of commitment to Judaism, especially for the men, was circumcision. This reference to “a good showing in the flesh” could have a double reference. It could refer to circumcision as well as to a prideful, sinful motive behind the effort of the Judaizers. We have seen Paul use the term “flesh” to refer to that sin nature which we all have.

Paul here is impugning the motives of the Judaizers on two counts. **First**, he makes this statement about a good showing in the flesh. He implies that the Judaizers have prideful motives. They want to report back to their friends in Jerusalem about all of the Gentiles whom they have signed up to become part of Judaism.

Such pride is also a danger for us in our service to the Lord. We are tempted to want to brag about the friends we have brought to a church service or all of the candy we have brought for the fall festival or all of the prayers that we have made for our missionaries. If we are honest with ourselves, we will recognize that it is hard to always have completely pure motives in our service to the Lord. With God’s help we do the best that we can.

In the Galatian situation Paul is extra suspicious that the Judaizers are not genuinely concerned for the welfare of the Galatian Gentiles. Paul has spoken in the previous chapter about the second great commandment to love our neighbors. As we strive to serve the people around us in whatever way we can, we can check our motives to make sure that we are genuinely concerned about their well-being.

Besides questioning the motives of the Judaizers for their prideful motives, he also **secondly**, charges them with doing what they are doing to avoid persecution. What is the source of this persecution? It is probably not the Gentiles. Many Gentiles had a problem with Jews anyway. So for Galatian Christians to become Jewish was not going to help them avoid persecution from the Romans.

The message that the Judaizers presented was going to help them avoid persecution from other Jews. It was the Jews who were the instigators of persecution against Jesus. It was Jews who opposed the mission of Paul to Gentile areas. In Acts #14 it was Jews who stoned Paul in an effort to kill him. These Judaizers who claim to be followers of Jesus are likely to avoid persecution if they can convince Christians, especially Gentile Christians, to become part of the Jewish religious system. The rabbis will be hard pressed to pick on these Judaizers if they see former Gentiles showing up in Jerusalem to worship on Jewish holidays and making gifts and required offerings which go to the Jewish establishment.

We also know that at this time there was a rising tide of Jewish nationalism. They had this saying with the acronym MIGA--- Make Israel Great Again. In a few years this more

radical wing of the Jews would lead the nation to revolt against the Romans. After initial success the Romans would come in and wipe out Jerusalem and the temple. Israel would not be restored as a nation for two thousand years. Judaizers would avoid persecution from these Jewish nationalists by recruiting Gentiles into the Jewish religious system.

Paul continues in v. 13: **“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.”** In what sense do these Judaizers not keep the law? In one sense Paul has argued that no one can keep the law perfectly. It is too hard. Take the Tenth Commandment. Who can say that they go through life without ever coveting anyone or anything? The only one who ever kept the law perfectly was Jesus.

In another sense Paul could be pointing to the hypocrisy of the Judaizers and their friends. It was the rabbis who criticized Jesus for healing people on the Sabbath. One of the stupid rules which they had developed was the no one should heal a person on the Sabbath. That had to qualify as work. Jesus kept healing people on the Sabbath. He pointed out to these rabbis that their own rules said that it was the right thing to do to help an animal out of a pit if he was found in that predicament on the Sabbath. So how could it be wrong to free someone trapped by physical infirmity on the Sabbath?

The problem that we have with people who become focused upon living by rules is that hypocrisy often enters into the picture. We have governors who declare that it is wrong to be out in public during a pandemic without wearing masks. Then they are discovered not wearing masks while they are eating out at an expensive French restaurant. Rules for thee, but not for me.

Paul is arguing that Christians have a certain freedom in the Christian life. People like these Judaizers come along and try to put them back under rules. They do it out of selfish motives to bring glory to themselves. New Testament professor Matthew Harmon writes, **“The opponents view the circumcision of these gentile believers as notches in their belt, trophies in their efforts to bring them under the authority of the Mosaic law covenant. In an honor-shame culture such as the first century, the opponents believed the path to maximizing their own honor was the circumcision of the Galatian gentile believers.”** (Harmon, *Galatians* commentary, p. 361) Paul's warning to the Galatian Christians and to us is not to buy into legalism.

II.

In vv. 14 & 15 we come to THE FINAL WORD ON THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL. (II. THE FINAL WORD ON THE...) Paul says in v. 14, **“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.”** We are to contrast this with the boasting of the Judaizers.

In Philippians #3 Paul described his credentials as a kosher Jew. He once had reason for boasting in his accomplishments as an up and coming rabbi. He was part of this

Jewish establishment, and he was very much respected in the Jewish religious world. But then he met Jesus. So Paul goes on to say in Philipians 3 that all of these earthly accomplishments he now regards as rubbish.

Now he will only boast in the cross of Christ. He is using a figure of speech here in which the cross stands for the crucifixion of Jesus and what it accomplished. In v. 12 Paul said that the Judaizers avoided persecution for the cross of Christ.

Today crosses are used as pieces of jewelry. We can never be sure if the crosses are intended to represent a serious Christian commitment. Sometimes they are. Sometimes they are not. A couple of days ago I was watching an evening news program where two drag queens were being interviewed. One of them was wearing a large cross. I am doubtful about whether that cross was intended to represent a Christian commitment.

It was different in the first century. Crosses and crucifixion were reserved in the first century for the most serious crimes. Crucifixion was especially used to punish people who were involved in rebellion against Rome. Roman citizens were exempt from ever being punished with crucifixion. The Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero (CICERO QUOTATION) is famously quoted as saying, **“Let the very name of the cross be far away, not only from the body of a Roman citizen, but even from his thoughts, his eyes, his ears.”** (*Rab. Pera.* 5.10.16)

Typically a criminal punished by crucifixion was first stripped naked and tied to a pole. There he was whipped with a cord studded with pieces of metal or bones. This was done in a public place to maximize the humiliation. Rome wanted everyone to see what happened to those who rebelled against the empire. Then the crossbar of the cross was tied to the shoulder of the victim, and he was forced to walk through the streets to the place of execution. Jesus had been so severely beaten that he was unable to bear this crossbar without help.

Then at the execution site, which was always in a public place, the naked victim was tied to the cross bar, or in Jesus' case, nailed through his wrists to the crossbar. Next he was hoisted up on the pole. His ankles were nailed to that pole. Then began the extended period of suffering. Sometimes it took victims three days to die. During this time victims had to deal with mocking, hunger, thirst, flies, pain, and humiliation. Death often came through suffocation when the victims could no longer expand their lungs to breathe. Jesus died more quickly because of the earlier beating He had suffered.

Historian Tom Holland observes, **“No death was more excruciating, more contemptible, than crucifixion. To be hung naked, ‘long in agony, swelling with ugly weals on shoulders and chest’, helpless to beat away the clamorous birds: such a fate, Roman intellectuals agreed, was the worst imaginable. So foul was the carrion-reek of their disgrace that many felt tainted even by viewing a crucifixion.”** (Holland, *Dominion*, p. 213)

Paul gives more of his perspective on crucifixion in 1 Corinthians #1 v. 23 (1 CORINTHIANS 1:23). There he says, “... **but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles...**”

This, then, is the folly to the Gentiles, to the Romans. Historian Tom Holland again tells us, “**Divinity... was for the very greatest of the great: for victors, and heroes, and kings. Its measure was the power to torture one’s enemies, not to suffer it oneself: to nail them to the rocks of a mountain, or to turn them into spiders, or to blind and crucify them after conquering the world. That a man who had himself been crucified might be hailed as a god could not help but be seen by people everywhere across the Roman world as scandalous, obscene, grotesque.**” (Holland, *Dominion*, p. 6) Such was the folly to the Gentiles. Such it is regarded by many today. In 1990 Ted Turner, the founder of CNN, accepted the Humanist of the Year award. On that occasion he remarked, “**I’m sure Christ was a wonderful person, but as for His having come down and suffered on the Cross so that our sins would be washed away--- weird, man, I’m telling you.**” (*National Review*, 3/18/1991) Such was, and is, the nature of unbelief.

For the Jews crucifixion presented a similar, but slightly different problem. The Hebrew Scriptures associated hanging on a tree with the curse of God. (DEUTERONOMY 21:22) According to Deuteronomy #21 vv. 22 & 23, “**And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, (DEUTERONOMY 21:23) his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.**” Why would the Jews want to follow a man cursed by God. Jesus was a stumbling block for them. The Jews were looking for a descendant of David, a warrior like their ancestor who would lead them in kicking the Romans out of their country.

The irony was that the greatest need of the Jews and the Gentiles was for one who would bear the curse of God for their sins, for our sins. Humanity needed a substitute, a God-man, who could both represent humanity and who could provide a sacrifice of infinite value. One was needed who would bear the penalty for the sins of humanity. (PROJECTOR OFF) Thus Paul told us in #3 v. 13, “**Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us--- for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree...’**” In this claim to truth Paul will boast. Such is the heart of the gospel, the story of mercy and grace and faith.

In v. 14 in our passage Paul again speaks of the world. The world has been crucified to Paul, and Paul has been crucified to the world. The reference here is to the system around us which has messed up values. It is the culture in which might prevails over right, where power is exalted over humility, where money prevails over love of one’s neighbor. In #1 v. 4 Paul described it as the present evil age. Even the religious world can be part of this world system. Paul was once part of it. He was much respected by the Jewish establishment. But now he has been cut off from it, and it has been cut off from him.

Verse 15: **“For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.”** In the old religious system circumcision was a big deal. It was a sign of one’s connection to the Mosaic Law. But the death of Jesus has rendered much of that irrelevant. With the advent of the church age circumcision has become irrelevant.

The important thing now is the new creation which is available to us through faith in Jesus. It does not matter how bad our past life has been. Forgiveness of sins has been provided at the cross. (PROJECTOR ON--- 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17) According to 2 Corinthians #5 v. 17, **“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation** [same word as we have in v. 15 of our passage]. **The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”** By virtue of our new relationship with Jesus God sees us as new creations, or new creatures. Hopefully this change is evident to people around us.

III.

From the final word on the heart of the Gospel we move to THE FINAL WORD ON PEACE, MERCY, AND GRACE. (III. THE FINAL WORD ON PEACE...) Such is the subject of vv. 16-18. We read in v. 16, **“And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.”**

A blessing is pronounced upon all who will walk by this *kanon*, from which we get the English word “canon.” Originally the reference was to a reed, then a measuring reed, then a standard, or rule. Thus we sometimes refer to “the canon of Scripture,” that is, the standard by which the 66 books of the Bible are regarded as part of Scripture.

Here in v. 16 the reference appears to be to v. 15. Peace and mercy are pronounced upon Gentile Christians in particular who are the object of attack by Judaizers. This is a plea again for Christians not to succumb to the pressure from Jewish legalizers.

Then we have this expression “the Israel of God.” Our understanding of this term plays a part in our broader understanding of systematic theology and eschatology, the study of last things. Some argue that “the Israel of God” is a reference to the church in general, to all Jews and Gentiles who are followers of Israel. These Christians comprise the new Israel.

The term “replacement theology” is sometimes used to describe this thinking. The idea is that the church is replacing Israel. Because of the rebelliousness of the nation of Israel, because of the Jewish rejection of Jesus as the Messiah, God has replaced Israel as the object of His special blessing with the church. The promises which God made to Israel about a kingdom are now being fulfilled spiritually in the church.

The difficulty with this perspective is that there are a number of references in the New Testament to the restoration of Israel as a nation and the future literal fulfillment of kingdom promises made to the physical descendants of Abraham. The Apostle Paul seems to argue in this way in Chapters 9 through 11 in the Book of Romans. To pick out one verse (ROMANS 11:1) consider Romans #11 v. 1: **“I ask, then, has God rejected**

his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.”

It seems most likely to me, and to other evangelicals who call themselves premillennialists, that Paul in v. 16 in his use of “the Israel of God” is referring to Jews who are truly Christians. There are at least three reasons why this is the case. (PROJECTOR OFF) First, the Greek conjunction translated as “and” in our ESV translation is the normal, typical meaning of the word. Older NIV translations which some of you use translate v. 16 as “**Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.**” Newer NIV translations say simply “**Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule--- to the Israel of God.**” These translators are making an interpretive decision here. But this would be a rare usage of this common Greek conjunction.

Then second, Paul repeats the Greek preposition translated as “upon” in the ESV translation after first using it before the word “them.” That would be unusual if Paul was trying to say that the “them” is the same as the “Israel of God.”

Then third, the word “Israel” appears 65 times in the New Testament. Nowhere else is it ever used to refer to the church. The argument seems to me to be strong that Paul is referring here in “Israel of God” to Jewish followers of Jesus.

Paul adds in v. 17: “**From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.**” The Greek term for “marks” is *stigmata*, which some of you might recognize. The term was used for branding marks which slaves might have to identify their owner. In some religious cults the word was used to describe the tattoos which worshipers might have to indicate the god or gods to whom they were committed.

Paul here is referring to the marks he has on his body which are there because of the beatings and whippings he has received from enemies of the gospel. At Lystra in Galatia he was stoned and left for dead by Jewish opponents. He probably had permanent marks on his body because of that incident. All of these marks were a visible testimony of his commitment to Jesus.

Paul concludes with his graceful benediction in v. 18: “**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.**” Paul began his letter with a reference to grace. He concludes it by speaking about grace. Understanding the grace of God is a central theme of this letter. It is a key to understanding the Christian life.

It is a key to understanding how we begin the Christian life. (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 2:8) Paul writes in Ephesians 2 v. 8, “**For by grace you have been saved through faith...**” Eternal salvation is not accomplished by anything we have to offer. It is because of Jesus’ work on the cross that salvation has been provided. Our responsibility to enter into the benefit of that is to exercise faith, to believe in Jesus.

The proper motivation in the Christian life then becomes to live in appreciation for what Jesus has already done for us. Also in Ephesians, in #1 v. 3, Paul writes, **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ...”** What a great God we have! What a great life He has provided for us! What a wonderful eternity lies in store for us!