

Seventh Sunday of Pentecost
July 15, 2007
Galatians 6:14

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

The Cross of Jesus Is Our Only Boast

1. The futility of others boasts
2. The blessings of the cross

^{NIV} Galatians 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.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Do you have a sense of how strange it was for ancient ears to hear Paul saying, "*May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*"? Today we can sing, "In the cross of Christ I glory" or "I'll cherish the old rugged cross" without thinking much about the apparent contradiction in those statements. But that's due mostly to the fact that we haven't witnessed a crucifixion; we haven't seen a condemned man stripped of his clothes, fastened to the cross with large nails, then hoisted upright to hang from that old rugged cross in excruciating pain. In A.D. 50 when Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians, the cross wasn't a religious-themed decoration for walls and lapels; it was an instrument of torture. It was considered shameful to die by crucifixion. There was no dignity in that death. It was the way disobedient slaves died and Roman citizens were exempted from crucifixion.

Yet, the apostle Paul says, "*May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" This morning, let's examine for a few minutes what he means with this strange statement. What is it that makes other boasts futile? And what are the blessings in the cross of Jesus that produce such boasting?

1. The futility of other boasts

Futile boasting was very much on Paul's mind as he wrote this letter. The churches in Galatia were being troubled by false teachers who have been labeled "Judaizers." These Judaizers believed that Jesus died and rose again, but they added something to the simple gospel message. They told Gentiles that God not only wanted them to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus, but also that they must be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses. In other words, the message of the Judaizers was, *Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (and do these good works that we prescribe for you) and you will be saved.* This different gospel was really no gospel at all. It's futile to start down the path of believing that we can be saved even in part by the works we do. There's not a living soul that take up that yoke of the law and satisfactorily do what God's law demands. Paul says here in Galatians, "**All who rely on observing the law are under a curse.**" (Gal. 3:10) That's a big step beyond futility. And not only is works righteousness an exercise in futility for us, it renders the work of Jesus futile. In another place in this letter, Paul writes, "**If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing.**" (2:21)

But trying to gain the status of righteousness before God by the law was still very common. In an earlier verse in this chapter Paul leads us to see that adding circumcision and the law of Moses to the gospel of Jesus was done in part because it was a way of avoiding persecution from radical Jews who weren't ready to give up the rites and regulations of the Old Testament. And there was hypocrisy involved too. Those who were pushing this agenda of good works weren't able to comply with the Law of Moses themselves, but they liked to boast when got a convert to their way of thinking. Theological error plus hypocrisy equals double-strength futility.

One of the most blatant examples of the futility of boasting is the Pharisee that Jesus mentions in a parable in Luke 18. Remember him? He was the fellow who went up to the temple and prayed, the Bible says, "about himself", "**God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.**" (18:11) What did that boasting get him? Not a thing! It was futile because it was the humble tax collector who threw himself on the mercy of God who went home justified, not the proud, boastful Pharisee.

Paul had firsthand experience with this tendency to boast. From his description of what he calls his "previous way of life in Judaism" (Gal. 1:13), he was almost always either boasting or looking for more reasons to boast. His bloodlines, his devotion to keeping the law, his ranking against other Jews with the same legalistic goals as his—all of it became the subject of boasting. And then came Paul's conversion and the stunning realization that all those things that had boasted about in his earlier way of life were nothing but "rubbish" (NIV Php. 3:8; KJV "dung"). Boasting in one's own accomplishments is futile.

We can sit here this morning and say, "I see the problem," but that doesn't mean we don't have to be on guard against the same kind of futile behavior. There resides deep inside every human being the belief that we can save ourselves by doing good works. Unless the law of God regularly levels us with a roundhouse right, we hear these whispers inside of us, "*You're better than the rest of this lot. In fact, you're a credit to God.*" If we're not careful, we'll begin believing those whispers and seriously think that we can stroll up to God's bar of justice with nothing in hand but our own good works. Do you question this? Try a little experiment. Ask your family or friends this question: "If God said to you, 'Why should I let you into heaven?' what would you tell him?" I'm afraid you're going to hear with depressing frequency an answer like this: "Because I'm a good person." "Because I've tried my best to live a good life." "I'm not perfect, but I'm not as bad as _____ (fill in the blank with the name of some public enemy)." It's great if you don't hear that. Rejoice if you don't hear that. But these are common (and wrong) answers to that all-important question.

Viewed correctly, the cross is a great leveler, because the first thing the cross says is, "This is where you deserved to be, *sinner.*" It's been called the "alien work" of the cross, but there is unmistakably at the cross the unspoken message that if God would fasten his Son to that instrument of torture, then he must be very angry about my sin. It doesn't matter who we are—Pharisee, tax collector, methamphetamine-addled car thief or all-around good guy—it was our sin that led Jesus to go to the cross. There was no other way. A cross-less Christianity is an impossibility. Jesus Christ and his cross are the heart of our faith. Without the cross, we're just another flavor of works righteousness, with little to distinguish us from Buddhism, Mormonism, Judaism or Islam. All of them prescribe works and lack the cross of our

Lord Jesus Christ. And that is a prescription for an eternity of regretting our futile boasting.

The cross deserves the prominence that we Christians give it. It deserves to be prominent in our homes and pinned to our lapels. It deserves to hang from our necks and be emblazoned on our T-shirts. We have no other boast. The cross is it. It's God's wisdom summarized in the simplicity of two intersecting lines. Just as long as the cross is also in our hearts. With the apostle Paul we rightly boast in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, because it is the source of all our blessings.

2. The blessings of the cross

Paul explains his startling statement about boasting only in the cross of Jesus this way: *"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."* I'm going to come back to this reason for boasting in the cross of Jesus, but I think that here in Galatians there's a whole list of reasons that precede it. First of all, the message of the cross is not human wisdom, but divine wisdom. A few weeks ago in our epistle we heard Paul say that he didn't get this message from any man, nor did he make it up himself; it was revealed to him by God. If you penetrate the inner recesses of the wisdom of God, you find a cross there. *"Christ crucified."* That's what we preach because that is the distillation of the wisdom of God.

Here's a second reason for boasting in the cross of Jesus. In the fourth verse of this epistle, Paul writes that Jesus **"gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age."** (1:4) We were perishing. We were headed to perdition with all the rest of humanity when Jesus came to our rescue at the cross. He gave us the only real hope there is—to find in his death on the cross our forgiveness and an open door to the Father's side.

Third, I mentioned earlier the associations that death by crucifixion had. The harshest of these was "cursed." **"Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."** (Gal. 3:13) That's what the Old Testament said. But, then, we were already under a curse because the Old Testament also says, **"Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."** (3:10b) Jesus went to the cross so that by suffering that cursed death for us he would be able to redeem us from the curse of the law. Now through faith in this crucified Savior of ours, we're not cursed, we're blessed. We're blessed to be justified by God, that is, declared not guilty. We're blessed with the Holy Spirit's promise forgiveness and eternal life—blessed on account of the cross of Jesus.

Another blessing of the cross? We were slaves. Yes, residents of the Land of the Free or not, we were slaves. It says here in Galatians that aside from Jesus, **"the whole world is a prisoner of sin"**—locked up tight, Supermax, not-getting-out-ever prisoners. And then Jesus died on the cross and the doors to our cells swung open and God said, "You're free to go." But you know what that means when it happens today—when prisoners are turned loose. They get a cardboard box of their possessions and bus fare and maybe a wish of good luck from a corrections officer. God did far better when he set us free on the basis of Jesus' cross. It says here in Galatians that Jesus died on the cross **"to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons."** How about that? In the time it took God to say, "I forgive you," we go from inmates to heirs of God with the privilege of calling God our Father.

And, now, this last one: We boast in the cross of Jesus because through his cross the world has been crucified to us and we to the world. It's the cross of Jesus that produces sanctified, God-pleasing living in us. It's not as if God justified us on the basis of Jesus' cross and then turned around and told us that we're going to have to produce sanctification by ourselves. The love of God seen so clearly at the cross of Jesus makes me dead to the temptations of a world so hostile to God and his purposes. The world has nothing to offer my new self, nothing that attracts, nothing that pleases. The world has been crucified to me. By the power of Christ's cross, we are recovered sin-addicts whose pulses no longer quicken at the prospect of sin. Or, as Paul says earlier, **"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."** (2:20)

I hope you have a sense of how strange it must have sounded to people in the Roman Empire to talk of boasting in the cross. But strange or not, it's accurate. All other boasting is futile, but the blessings of the cross on which our Savior died are many and real. That's why we cherish that old rugged cross. Amen.