

Matthew 10:40-42; 25:31-46
2022

Galatians 6:1-18

October 16,

Reception of New Members/Sacrament of Baptism

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE CROSS-SHAPED LIFE
“Grace As the Foundation of Life”

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As I was eating lunch on Wednesday, I was scrolling through the news feed on my phone, when the following headline caught my attention: “A \$100 million campaign aims to fix Jesus’ brand from followers’ damage.” Here are the first few paragraphs:

“Billboards with messages like ‘Jesus let his hair down, too’ and ‘Jesus went all in, too,’ have been posted in major markets like New York City and Las Vegas. And ads featuring black-and-white online videos about Jesus as a rebel, an activist or a host of a dinner party have been viewed more than 300 million times, according to organizers.

“The He Gets Us campaign, funded by the Signatory, a Christian foundation based in Kansas, will expand in the next few months, with an updated website, an online store where people can get free gear if they forgive someone or welcome a stranger, and an outreach program for churches, all leading up to a Super Bowl ad. Jon Lee, one of the chief architects of the campaign, said organizers hope to start a movement of people who want to tell a better story about Jesus and act like him.

“Jason Vanderground, president of Haven, a branding firm based in Grand Haven, Mich., said the movement hopes to bridge the gap between the story of Jesus and the public perception of his followers. The campaign has done extensive market research and found that, while many Americans like Jesus, they are skeptical of his followers.”¹

The article called to mind the opening lyrics to “Superstar” from the 1970’s rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The song is sung by Judas Iscariot on the night before Jesus’s crucifixion:

*Ev'ry time I look at you
I don't understand
Why you let the things you did
Get so out of hand
You'd have managed better
If you'd had it planned
Now why'd you choose such a backward time
And such a strange land?
If you'd come today
You could have reached a whole nation
Israel in 4 BC*

Had no mass communication.

Near the end of the news article, Jason Vanderground said, “Our research shows that many people’s only exposure to Jesus is through Christians who reflect him imperfectly, and too often in ways that create a distorted or incomplete picture of his radical compassion and love for others. We believe it’s more important now than ever for the real, authentic Jesus to be represented in the public marketplace as he is in the Bible.”²

It’s kind of hard to argue with the motivation of the \$100 million marketing campaign — “to bridge the gap between the story of Jesus and the public perception of his followers.” However, it is hard to imagine Jesus answering Peter’s question, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?” with these words, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven . . . and if you do forgive, you’ll get some free gear.” Likewise, it’s hard to imagine the king in Jesus’s parable answering the question, “When was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you?” with this promise, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me . . . and if you do welcome the stranger, you can get some free gear.”

Here we are at the end of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Galatia. As he wraps up his message to the believers, Paul recaps many of the themes he has addressed — living according to the flesh vs. living according to the Spirit; boasting in one’s own accomplishments; circumcision vs. uncircumcision; the cross of Jesus Christ; and what it means to live the cross-shaped life. I suppose we could say that Paul was, in fact, trying to bridge the gap between the story of Jesus and the public perception of his followers. In other words, as he does in all of his letters, Paul reminds the Galatians (and us), “This is who you are in Christ Jesus . . . now live like it!”

We’ve heard the same message for the past six Sundays . . . and again today . . . either directly or in different words: “The first commandment is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29-30)

At the end of his letter to the Galatians, Paul gives some specific ways to “love God and love neighbor” . . . [from *The Message*]

. . . “If someone falls into sin, forgivingly restore him, saving your critical comments for yourself. *You* might be needing forgiveness before the day’s out.” (Galatians 6:1)

. . . “Stoop down and reach out to those who are oppressed. Share their burdens, and so complete Christ’s law. If you think you are too good for that, you are badly deceived.” (Galatians 6:2)

. . . “Don’t be impressed with yourself. Don’t compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.” (Galatians 6:4-5)

... “What a person plants, he will harvest. . . the one who plants in response to God, letting God’s Spirit do the growth work in him, harvests a crop of real life, eternal life.” (Galatians 6:7-8)

... “So let’s not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don’t give up, or quit. Right now, therefore, every time we get the chance, let us work for the benefit of all, starting with the people closest to us in the community of faith.” (Galatians 6:9-10)

But, remember, Paul is not giving us a list of do’s and don’ts that we can check off in order to earn God’s love and grace. In fact, Paul point blank reminds the Galatians and all Christians, “You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” (Galatians 5:4) And when we cut ourselves off from grace, we end up “living according to the flesh,” that is, living for ourselves rather than living for God and other people.

Speaking of mass communication, think about the barns (mainly in the South) with the big message painted on the sides, “Get Right With God!” or “Are You Saved?” Well, it’s kind of hard to have a deep, theological discussion with the person who painted those signs since (1) you don’t know who painted them and (2) you might be zipping by at 70+ miles per hour. However, they both beg the question . . . “How do you do that?” In a sense, that’s the question Paul has been wrestling with throughout his letter to the Galatians. Not quite halfway through his letter, Paul states emphatically, “We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.” (Galatians 2:16)

In his letters, Paul typically spends the first half writing about all that God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (not what we have done for God). In other words, God answers the questions “How do you do that? How do you get right with God? How are you saved?” by sending his Son Jesus Christ to give us new life, freedom from the constraints of the law, and the power of the Holy Spirit to love God and love neighbor. . .

... which is why Paul uses the second half of his letters laying out how we are called to live the kind of life that is characteristic of people who are now in a right relationship with God and saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. . . because of what God has done for us.

In theological language, what God has done for us in the cross of Jesus Christ is called “justification” and how we live as God’s people in response to God’s grace in Jesus Christ is called “sanctification.” Paul has used many different ideas and images to describe our “sanctification” —

* It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

* The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

* But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.

* For freedom Christ has set us free. . . only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

* Live by the Spirit . . . be guided by the Spirit.

* Bear the fruit of the Spirit.

For years I have had a little book called *Keywords of the Faith: Running the Risk of Heresy!* by Angus T. Stewart and Alan A.S. Reid. In their introduction, the authors write, “C.S. Lewis once suggested that before ordination was permitted, a minister should first have to pass an examination in translating the scholarly, technical language of theology into the language of the kitchen and the shop floor: ‘Any fool can write learned language. The vernacular is the real test.’”

That’s the purpose of *Keywords of Faith* and the challenge of preaching. In their book, Stewart and Reid write about “Grace” and “Justification and Sanctification.”

About “Grace” — “One of the reasons why St Paul spoke so often about ‘the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ’ was because he had experienced the reality of undeserved love in his own life. For years he had denied Jesus’ claims, blasphemed his name and persecuted his followers. When he was confronted with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he might well have expected Jesus to say, ‘Just you wait. You will pay for this.’ But instead, Christ said in effect, ‘Look Saul, I still want you on my side.’ That day the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ became compelling and real for Saul.”

And to go along with “Grace” there is “Sanctification” — “But the Christ, who has been forgiven and restored by the goodness of God, is asked to try to grow in goodness, and is encouraged to expect wholesome change in his or her life. This will happen if the Christian tries to live by the example of Jesus, and shares in the very life of Jesus through the sacrament of Holy Communion which Jesus gave to nourish us. It becomes, as our forebears said, a ‘means of grace.’ St Paul, in the first chapter of Romans, addresses ordinary sinful people with the dramatic words ‘you, who are called to be Saints.’ There is no false piety in the phrase — just the magnificent recognition that because of what Christ has done for us, we had better get on with the business of living as God intended for us to live.”³

When I have shared this story before, many of you have said, “I heard the same thing when I was a teenager!” When I was a teenager and heading out the door to do whatever, my parents frequently told me, “Remember who you are, whose you are, and where you come from.”

The same can be said to us as followers of Jesus Christ who are seeking to live in the freedom of Christ. Brothers and sisters, we are children of God, heirs of the promise. Through Jesus Christ, we belong, body and soul, to God. So then, if we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit, that we may bear the fruit of the Spirit, love God and neighbor, and live the cross-shaped life.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, help us live a cross-shaped life: to bear one another's burdens, to sow to the Spirit and reap eternal life, to not grow weary in doing what is right, to work for the good of all, to live by your Spirit and to be guided by your Spirit, that we may fulfill your commandment to love one another. Amen.

NOTES

¹Bob Smietana, "A \$100 million campaign aims to fix Jesus' brand from followers' damage," October 12, 2022 at www.washingtonpost.com.

²Ibid.

³Angus T. Stewart and Alan A. S. Reid, *Keywords of Faith: Running the Risk of Heresy!* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1992). C.S. Lewis, p. 1. Grace, p. 41. Justification and Sanctification, p. 103.