

**Micah 6:6-8**

**Galatians 2:1-21**

**September 11, 2022**

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

**THE CROSS-SHAPED LIFE**  
**“A Life Pleasing to God”**

***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.***

Have you ever wondered what people in the Bible actually looked like? I’m not talking about Sunday School pictures or actors in Bible movies. We only have vague and general descriptions of different Bible characters. Several women in the Old Testament are described as “very beautiful.” Esau came out of Rebekah’s womb as a red and hairy baby. Jesse’s youngest son, David, “was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome.” The prophets Elijah and John the Baptist almost sound like twins, but we primarily hear about their clothes. King Saul was head and shoulders taller than the rest of his people, while the tax collector Zaccheus had to climb up in a sycamore tree to Jesus “because he was short in stature.” And, of course, we have no description of what Jesus looked like in person.

Then there’s the apostle Paul. The New Testament doesn’t tell us what he looked like, but Paul himself reports what other people said about him: “For they say, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.’” (2 Corinthians 10:10) At the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., someone wrote what has been described as “a religious romance” about the Apostle Paul’s first missionary journey. It is called *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Here is how that apocryphal work describes Paul: “He was a man of middling size, and his hair was scanty, and his legs were a little crooked, and his knees were projecting, and he had large eyes and his eyebrows met, and his nose was somewhat long.”

During our first year in seminary, during the Introduction to the New Testament class, our professor Dr. Achtemeier read that report of Paul’s appearance, while we all dutifully took notes. Then one of our classmates whispered, “He’s describing himself!” That was good for a laugh! Here’s a twenty-five-year-old picture of me and Dr. Achtemeier, a world-renowned New Testament scholar and authority on the Apostle Paul.



Maybe you can see why we thought he was reading a self-description. And guess what Dr. Achtemeier's first name was? Paul!

Last Sunday we heard the story about Saul's/Paul's Damascus road experience and the beginnings of his proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles. This morning we heard a bit more about Paul going to Jerusalem to present his work to the pillars of the church – Peter, James, and John – who gave Paul and Titus the right hand of fellowship and, we can assume, their blessing to keep on doing what they were doing.

The question remains: How did this man who was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” change into the most famous and influential preacher of the gospel the world has ever known? Here's how Frederick Buechner described that remarkable transformation. In Buechner's words you can hear the strains of Paul's theology of Christ and the cross. “Little by little the forgiven person became a forgiving person, the person who found he (*sic*) was loved became capable of love, the slob that God had had faith in anyway became de-slobbed, faithful, and good works blossomed from his branches . . . like fruit from a well-watered tree. What fruit? Love, Paul wrote the boys and girls in Galatia. Love was the sweetest and tenderest. And then ‘joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control’ till his typewriter ribbon was in tatters and he had to take to a pencil instead (Galatians 5:22-23).”

He continued, “And *Christ* was his other key word, of course. *Christ* – the key to the key. He never forgot how he'd called him by name – twice, to make sure it got through – and ‘while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us’ he wrote out for the Romans (Romans 5:6) and for the Galatians again, ‘I have been crucified with Christ’ – all that was dried up in him, full of hate and self-hating, self-serving and sick, all of it behind him now, dead as a doornail – so that ‘it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me’ (Galatians 2:20). And then, to the Philippians by registered mail, return receipt requested: ‘For me to live is Christ’ (Philippians 1:21), and to the

Ephesians, for fear they'd feel neglected if the mail carrier came empty handed, 'You he made alive when you were dead' (Ephesians 2:1). Alive like him."<sup>1</sup>

You see, that's why Paul got so angry with Peter at Antioch. It's not that Paul expected every believer in Christ to have the same kind of revelation experience he had on the Damascus Road. But, Paul did expect every believer in Christ, no matter how they came to faith, to live out the freedom Christ brings to each and every believer.

Here's the scenario: Paul left Jerusalem figuring everything was okay with the church leaders there. He set up his headquarters to the north in Antioch. Eventually, Peter paid a visit – the same Peter who had given Paul the right hand of fellowship back in Jerusalem and agreed he should go and preach to the Gentiles. At first, Peter lived out of the freedom Christ brings. He ate with the Gentile believers and enjoyed fellowship with them. But then Peter felt the heat from some people who showed up from Jerusalem. They must have brought a message that folks weren't too happy with him hanging out with the Gentiles who hadn't yet become Jews by taking on the whole law and customs of the Jews.

But remember last week? Faith in Jesus Christ + ANYTHING else = a false gospel, according to Paul. So Paul point-blank confronted Peter, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Galatians 2:14) In other words, Peter, if you're going to put your trust in Jesus Christ with your talk, you're going to have to show your trust by walking the walk. To demand anything more from the Gentiles than faith in Jesus Christ makes them second-class Christians.

To paraphrase Paul from his letter to the Romans, "That's why it depends on faith." Or, to quote from today's epistle lesson, "yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ." (Galatians 2:16) Those words helped launch the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and continue to shape our Presbyterian theology and beliefs to this day. But what exactly does it mean for how we are supposed to live as Christians in 2022? What does it mean to live a cross-shaped life?

Here's how *The Message* renders Paul's argument against his opponents. See if this doesn't help answer that question, "What does it mean to live a cross-shaped life?" "We Jews know that we have no advantage of birth over 'non-Jewish sinners. We know very well that we are

not set right with God by rule-keeping but only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. How do we know? We tried it—and we had the best system of rules the world has ever seen! Convinced that no human being can please God by self-improvement, we believed in Jesus as the Messiah so that we might be set right before God by trusting in the Messiah, not by trying to be good.”

With apologies to the late Eugene Peterson, what if we re-wrote those words to apply to us? “We Presbyterians, especially those of us who have been in the church all of our lives, know that we have no advantage of birth over ‘non- Presbyterians’ or people who are new to the faith. We know very well that we are not set right with God by following the *Book of Order* perfectly but only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. How do we know? We tried it, and we pride ourselves on doing things decently and in order. Convinced that no human being can please God by self-improvement, we believe in Jesus as the Messiah so that we might be set right before God by trusting in the Messiah, not by trying to be good, keeping our noses clean, and thinking we have a corner on the market when it comes to this ‘being right with God’ thing.”

Even though we know very well that we are not set right with God by rule-keeping and that no human being can please God by self-improvement, we continue to fall prey to the temptation that there must be **something** we can and have to do to earn and keep God’s grace in our lives. Even more pernicious than that, however, is our false humility that leads us to say, “Well, I may not be perfect, but at least I’m not like **those people**” – and each of us can fill in the blank about who **those people** are in our lives. Whenever we add ANYTHING else to faith in Jesus Christ, we are, as Paul says, building up again the very things that were once torn down.

Last Sunday I left us all with three questions to think about:

- What does the cross of Jesus Christ mean to you?
- What does it mean to live the cross-shaped life?
- How and when and why does our church restrict, narrow, or limit the love of God to an exclusive few?

Today I want to add some more things for us to think about as Christians who say we believe that a person is justified/put into a right relationship with God not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus

Christ. This isn't just – or even primarily – about our individual faith, as much as it is about what it means to be a church that not only believes but demonstrates in everything we do that a person is put into a right relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ.

Something to think about . . .

- In our church, do we implicitly or explicitly require new participants to conform to previously existing patterns of congregational behavior?
- How diligent are we in discerning what is necessary and what is contingent in these matters of congregational life and faith?
- And as important as these matters are – and they are very important – do we really and truly take to heart Paul's message that no human acts or works, none whatsoever, are what ultimately put us in a right relationship with God?<sup>2</sup>

I began this sermon with a picture of the Apostle Paul from *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, but I didn't share the entire description. It also said, "he was full of grace and mercy; at one time he seemed like a man, and at another time he seemed like an angel." Paul would be the first to admit – and emphasize – that if he were full of grace and mercy or ever looked like an angel, it wasn't because of anything he himself had done. No, he would say, it was because, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And 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." (Galatians 2:19b-20) That description of the believer's life is far more important than what we look like physically.

That, in a nutshell, is what it means for us to live – as individual believers and most especially as a church – the cross-shaped life.

***Let us pray: Almighty God, by grace alone you call us and accept us in your service. Strengthen us by your Spirit, and make us worthy of your call, that we may walk in newness of life in and with the faithfulness of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Frederick Buechner, originally published in *Peculiar Treasures* and later in *Beyond Words*. Found at "Paul," September 9, 2018 at [www.frederickbuechner.com](http://www.frederickbuechner.com).

<sup>2</sup>Alicia Vargas, "Commentary on Galatians 2:15-21, June 12, 2016," at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).