

## **"This rule: A cross-controlled view"**

A sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Galatians 6:14-16

You may be surprised that we're singing a Lenten hymn, "Come to Calvary's High Mountain," but it goes with Galatians 6:14-16: "Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." Finally here at the end of Galatians there's a rule, something to go by, something that tells us what to do.

Someone has said: "Theology bakes no bread. What's the use of it? What's important is how you live, what you do. We have to be practical. All of this other stuff doesn't do anything. Just tell me what to do." Here at the end of Galatians Paul says: "Peace and mercy upon those who live by this rule."

To illustrate: Americans are the new Romans. The Romans were the engineers of the ancient world. They built roads, harbors, ships. They managed an empire for 500 years, and they made it work. Over these 500 years it's hard to think of notable philosophers, except for Seneca. When we think of people who wrote drama and poetry, there was Virgil and Cicero. But little compared to the Greek philosophers, poets, dramatists, and historians. The Greeks produced Alexander the Great, but that empire, which was one of the largest up to that time, lasted only fifteen years. He died when he was thirty-two. Then his empire fragmented. The Greeks were not empire builders. They were not those who created great systems of government, but they were the ones who did the thinking. And we are the Romans. We make it work.

We want to know: What's the rule? What is to be done? If we look back on our history, did we ever produce any great theologians? People mention Jonathan Edwards in the middle of the Eighteenth Century. And Reinhold Niebuhr in the middle of the Twentieth Century. And that's about it.

And what about philosophers? There's Ralph Waldo Emerson, but he was more of a poetic philosopher. William James, but now he is largely forgotten. But otherwise, if we need theologians, we buy them out of Europe. If we need philosophers, we buy them out of Europe.

Here is Paul in Gal 6:15 saying: "There is this rule. Finally, after six chapters, what we are supposed to do." The verse before "the rule" says: "Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world is crucified to me and I to the world."

Here there is a translation problem. "Glory" and "boast" are the same thing. Paul is referring to Jeremiah 9:23-24: "Let him who glories, glory in the Lord." He uses this verse three times, in Gal 6:14, 1 Cor 1:31, and 2 Cor 10:17. What he really means is: "Far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of Christ."

What is he saying? In Gal 1:8-9 Paul wrote this amazing statement: "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that we preached to you, let him be damned. As I have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be damned." Salvation is at stake.

His opponents come to him and say: "Who are you to say what is the gospel, to define it? Then Paul goes on to defend why he is an apostle and why this is the gospel. In 2 Cor 12:12 Paul says: "I can perform all the miracles that you do. I have had success starting congregations. But you know what I'll boast about? I boast about how I failed, how I was weak and in trouble but 'when I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor 12:10). It's about God's doing, not my doing."

Then in Galatians 2:5 and 2:14 he says it's the "truth" question. It's "the truth of the gospel." Over against Peter. Over against those from Jerusalem who have come to undermine him. It's "the truth of the gospel." Salvation is at stake.

After this, he goes on with material about Abraham and Moses, but then he comes to the end and says: "Here's the rule. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but a new creation" (Gal 6:15).

Circumcision counts for nothing. We have no problem with that. We know we're not bound by the 613 laws of the Old Testament. But right away we're caught because the human heart is an idol-making machine: We end up saying: "Of course, we're not going to follow all those Old Testament laws." And then we concoct another religion, a more modern, more enlightened one.

Some time ago a Baptist chaplain in a state Senate prayed in Jesus' name. The Senate fired him. No, you can't pray in Jesus' name. You have to pray to some God in general. All of the other religions, for example Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism, are allowed to pray in the name of their particular God. But Christians are supposed to pray to God in general because, after all, we all pray in our own way. Prayer is in all religions. There's nothing unique about praying.

Even the New Testament mentions God-fearers. In Acts 10:2 Cornelius, the centurion, is mentioned. They knew about people who were good, law-abiding, and even strict in their lives. Modernists end up not with Jewish law but with their own made-up religion.

Paul says neither circumcision nor – and this is the kicker – "nor uncircumcision." Modernists say let's give up all these old practices. But they can't escape their idol-making

hearts. What Paul means is that you end up with lawlessness, but in our context we end up in victimology. After all, everybody's a victim. No one can be blamed because we're all victims. We end up in uncircumcision. Another religion, of course.

What Paul says is "neither circumcision, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." The thing about Paul is that in his letters, he's often repeating himself. What does he mean by "new creation"? In 2 Cor 5:16-17 he writes: "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation."

What Paul is saying is what the "new creation" is. What's new is that we look at everybody with cross-colored glasses. That's a mixed metaphor, but it helps us see what Paul is saying in 2 Corinthians as well as Galatians. "No longer from a human point of view." You may think the opposite of a human point of view is a spiritual point of view. But what he says is: No longer from a human point of view but from the cross-controlled point of view, cross-colored glasses.

In 1520 Luther wrote *On Christian Freedom*. There's a sentence toward the end of that essay: "The Christian is perfectly free Lord of all, subject to none; the Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" (*LW* 31:344).

Both of them. At the same time. Completely. We are completely free and completely subject to all. At the same time, totally. Not partially this and partially that, but totally because it's a new creation. Everything is not only seen through the cross but controlled by that. It's a new creation. It's not one human-made-up religion or any other human-made-up religion. It's God's doing. Therefore Paul concludes: "Peace and mercy upon those who live by this rule, upon the Israel of God" (which in this usage is his term for "church"). Amen