

Those who want to impress people by means of the flesh are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. ¹³ Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh. 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. ¹⁵ Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. ¹⁶ Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God. (Galatians 6:12-16 NIV2011)

Christ's Cross Gives You Something to Boast About

You knew better. You knew you shouldn't have done this. You knew you should have done that. But what can you say? You reached your point and you broke. You try so hard to do the right thing! That should count for something, right? After all, everyone has their breaking point, don't they? And the devil knows that too. You try so hard to not draw attention to it. Maybe you are tough person and you refuse to see it. Maybe you've convinced yourself it's not there. But it is. You do. And the devil knows where to really make it hurt and loves pushing on it. And he keeps doing it. Sometimes he lets up only to come after you another way. Other times he doesn't need to sit there whispering in your ear. Your own sinful nature is loud enough. It's even more persistent looking for any foothold it can grab onto. Or, it's like the Galatian churches to whom Paul is writing.

As Paul closes his letter he wants to warn these Galatian churches again about these people known as the Judaizers. These were people who insisted you needed to have it both ways: be Christian and you still need to follow the Old Testaments laws, customs and traditions. The thing about these Judaizers is that they had dealt with the persecution and pressure. They felt it from the Jewish people who deny Jesus. They feel it from the non-Jews, the Gentiles. And so, in order to relieve the pressure coming from the Jews and to impress them, they were circumcised. And now these Judaizers are trying to force these Galatian Christians to follow suit. This is the hill they are going to die on.

Now maybe you are thinking, what's the big deal? The big deal is that by caving into this pressure from the Judaizers, the Christians would be throwing away what they have in Jesus. Underneath it all these Judaizers are teaching that to be saved you needed more than just Jesus. It was Jesus plus their own actions; especially circumcision. And so they are pushing Galatians to do the same.

In place of "Galatian Churches" put yourself. And in place of the Judaizers think of other people and things that put pressure on you to go against what God reveals to us. You feel it when you don't join in in prayer with those who are part of another church body. You feel the pressure when you don't join in with another church's activities

because we do not teach the same thing. You feel the pressure of possibly being shamed because you aren't fighting for the "right" cause—whatever that might be. You might feel the pressure because you decide that you aren't going to work but take time to be in God's Word. You aren't going to live together before marriage even though financially it might seem to make more sense. You are going to set aside your amount for offering first, not after everything else. You feel the pressure of society that says you are being ridiculous and foolish for believing and practicing what God's Word teaches. You feel the pressure of old pet sins that keep coming back. You feel it from new ones too. Whoever is pressuring you or wherever it is coming from, you can summarize the pressure as saying "no" to self. No to relieving the pressure by falling into sin. "No" to self that wants to be part of that other group that seems to be more popular. "No" to self that wants you to go against God's will. Or, as Jesus describes it in Matthew 16:24, this is the cross that denies self and follows him. It carries the burden while pushing against the pressure of temptation instead of caving-in.

But all too often and easily though you can take out the name Judaizers and insert your own. Too often instead of pushing against we've caved in because we were afraid of offending or being labeled judgmental. We've caved because we didn't want to be shamed. We've caved because the pressure became too great. Or sometimes we cave with so very little pressure because we want to and we decide doing what I want is more important than doing what God's wants.

And then, instead of confessing our sin, like those Judaizers we look to validate why we did it. We try and find ways to make ourselves feel better about what we did. Maybe you try to convince other people what we did shouldn't be seen as that bad. And what makes it all the worse, whether you are see it or not, you are pushing them into feeling foolish for thinking it is.

Or we try to impress others with the seemingly good things we have done. We point to our own hills that we are willing to die on. For the Judaizers it was circumcision. For you it may be how you go to church and you even want to be here (or watch it online). It may be how you volunteer so much of your time and you try extra hard to make sure people are doing well. Your hill is being sure people know, "I'm just doing the best I can." It may be your own sufferings and the difficulty of your life, how victimized you've been, the sickness, pain, and heart-ache you endured. You probably wouldn't say it out loud, but we use all of these—even and especially the suffering—to give us license to cave to the pressure to sin. And if it's not to impress other people, we may try and use it to impress God.

Why? Because it kills me to say, "No." Literally. It does. When you say "No" to self you are crucifying the sinful nature and killing it. But that sinful nature kicks and

screams all the way to the cross and too many times, ashamedly, I let it get its way. I don't kill it. I let it keep living. Then it slimes its way back and takes hold. So you cave into that pressure. Then life, for right now, feels like it gets a little easier. A little bit of the pressure is gone. It seems like things are going better. But you've fallen for the lie. Where Jesus promises discomfort in the life with carrying the cross, you listened to the devil who says that shouldn't be. Where Jesus promises that before the crown of life you must face the cross, you've listened to the empty promise that if you really are God's and you've done enough right things you shouldn't have to deal with any crosses.

But Jesus asks us, "What good is it if you gain the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matthew 16:26). So you gained some relief and comfort in this life. You want to believe that it shouldn't be that big of a deal. But Jesus warns, when we cave into that pressure, you forfeit your place in eternal life. We know better. We know we shouldn't do it. But we do because we are weak. And as long as our boast is in ourselves and our mind is on things of man and temporary comfort rather than the things of God, we've lost our lives instead of saving them.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, our boast cannot be in ourselves or anything else except for the cross of Christ. Paul says that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision mean a thing. The outward displays of religion mean nothing. You are a new creation. It's not about you. It's not about your own outward display of religion with your doing your best with the things we have done or not done. Instead, our boast is in the cross of Christ. It's complete foolishness to the Gentiles—why would you boast in someone who is executed on a cross? It's a stumbling block for the Jews—how can that save us? Surely that cannot be enough. It's the most offensive thing to our nature. It kills our pride because it's not coming from you. But our boast is in the cross of Christ for on that cross your Savior dies. There's your Savior who always picked up his cross never caving into the pressure of sin. Shedding his blood is your Savior who always endured against the pressure of society. On that cross Jesus hangs between heaven and earth for people like you and me who are more concerned about comfort in this world than following God's will. But with his arms stretched on that cross Jesus shields you from God's wrath as God's hatred and punishment for sin rain down on him. But since he is punished, you have peace with God. It's not about the hills you are willing to die on but what Jesus accomplishes on that hill on his cross where he dies for you. With his blood pouring over you he has washed your sins away so God does not treat you as your actions deserve but gives you mercy.

But just as it was for Jesus, so it must be for us: we must die first before we are made alive. And so in those baptismal waters you died with Jesus and were raised to life again. All your sins were nailed to his cross where we died with him and are buried with Jesus in his tomb. But that's where those sins stay when you rose with Jesus at your

baptism. with the sign of the cross on your head and heart God marks you as his child—a new creation—and you enter into this cross-carrying life.

Each day we practice this dying and rising with repentance. Instead of trying to condone, validate, excuse or ignore the sin, confess it. Kill it. Nail it to Jesus' cross. And be assured that Jesus does not leave you there in the dirt with your cross driving you down. He picks you back up again using his cross to support you. He invites you to come to the Lord's Supper and receive his body and blood that he shed for you on his cross to assure you, "Your sins are forgiven. Depart in peace." And when you have fallen again and caved into pressure, when we've tried so very hard and failed, he's there telling you, "It's not about you. It's about me and my cross. I still haven't left or abandoned you. Your sins are forgiven. And I will never get tired of forgiving you."

Every day we face new and old crosses that we carry as followers of Jesus. You will until your dying breath. But do not despair. As it was for Jesus so it will be for you: when you breathe your final breath in this world you have life with him because at his cross you receive peace and mercy. Fix your eyes on Christ's cross. There is something you can boast about. Amen.