

Galatians 6:17

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[0 : 00] Now let's turn to the first passage of scripture we read in Paul's letter to the Galatians, Galatians chapter 6 and verse 17.

Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. There are two types of mark mentioned in this passage.

The one is the mark of circumcision, the distinguishing mark of the Jewish people under the Old Testament. And the other is the mark, or rather marks, in Paul's body.

And there seems to be some kind of comparison going on in this passage between these two. One was the mark of what was now an empty tradition, and the other was the mark of devotion to Jesus.

What is your distinguishing mark? Is your distinguishing mark more akin to the circumcision of the Jews, which had become, by this New Testament age, an empty ritual?

[1 : 35] Or is your distinguishing mark more like that of the Apostle Paul? Marks that reflected a devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. The word that's actually used here for mark is like a brand mark.

You know how a farmer or a shepherd will distinguish animals by putting a certain mark or brand on them. And that distinguishes their sheep or their cattle from that belonging to anybody else.

Well, it's something of that idea that the Apostle Paul has here. The marks he's speaking about distinguish him as a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What are your distinguishing marks? What would people recognize about you if they know that you're a religious person? What kind of thing distinguishes you?

Is it some kind of just empty tradition? Or is it some real and vital devotion to the Lord Jesus? That's the comparison, I think, that's brought before us here this evening as we look at these words.

[2 : 47] First, I want to look with you at the mark of the empty tradition. Circumcision that's mentioned just in the previous verses here. For instance, verse 15, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything but count as a new creation.

You see, there were those who were emphasizing circumcision in Galatia. In verse 12, those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised.

The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. So on. The point was that there were some of these false teachers going around in Galatia, the area where Paul had evangelized and planted churches.

And they were going around now trying to teach something different to the people from the gospel of Jesus Christ. They were trying to teach that Jesus had not fulfilled all the Old Testament rituals and law.

And that these things still had to be maintained. And you could only be saved if you maintained these traditions. And that's why the Apostle Paul here, not only in this passage, but throughout Galatians, is so strong in his condemnation of their teachings.

[4 : 13] Because they were preaching, as he said, another gospel. One that was leading people away from the Lord Jesus Christ. Well, of course, as we look at circumcision, we must remember that it is something that was originally commanded by God.

And therefore, it was something that originally was good. It was given originally, not in connection with what was known as the law at Sinai.

And that's the way it came to be thought of by the Jewish people. But it was given originally to Abraham. And it was given to him, not right at the beginning, when God first made his covenant with him, but only a little later.

Indicative of the fact that it was not the circumcision, it was not what human beings could do to distinguish them, that made them the covenant people of God. But rather, it was what God did.

God approached Abraham direct. God took the initiative. And God made a covenant with Abraham. God said, I will be your God.

[5 : 25] And you will be my people. So even right there at the beginning, we see that the emphasis was not so much on the circumcision, but on the covenant that God made.

But nonetheless, circumcision was given as the sign of the covenant. It was to be the distinguishing feature, or the distinguishing mark, if you like, of the covenant people of God.

Now, it was not something unique in the ancient world. Other peoples also practiced circumcision. But this was to be a distinguishing mark of the people of God in Old Testament times.

And it was a symbol of their covenant commitment. It symbolized a costly commitment, because it involved the shedding of blood. It involved a wholehearted commitment to God.

That was what it was supposed to symbolize. That's why that strange kind of expression, to our ears anyway, is used in the Old Testament, circumcise your heart. Now, what did that mean?

[6 : 27] It meant that you were to have the same kind of costly commitment, spiritually, in your heart, to God, as you had physically in the sign of circumcision.

But of course also, it was recognized as a sign of cleansing. And so often it was linked with the idea of turning from sin in Old Testament times.

And again, of course, that involves something spiritual. So just the physical sign of circumcision was not enough. So often the Old Testament prophets refer to the fact that people's hearts had to be circumcised and therefore cleansed.

So the origin of circumcision was at that time of the covenant being made with Abraham. But then, very much in the Jewish mind, it became linked with the covenant that God made at Sinai with the nation of Israel.

Now there's no specific link at the time of Sinai, but rather, 40 years later, when they enter the Promised Land, the first thing they have to do is to circumcise all the people.

[7 : 47] Because in that period of 40 years, a whole generation grew up that were not circumcised. And so it became, in the minds of the nation of Israel, tied in very much to the fact that they were a covenant nation.

They'd been given the law at Sinai. And these two things, by the time of the New Testament, by the time the Apostle Paul is now writing, these two things had become inextricably bound up in Jewish mind and culture.

And the Apostle Paul himself was part of that whole culture originally. And he spoke of one of his distinguishing marks as a proper Jew and as a Pharisee and as someone who was blameless regarding the law.

He mentioned also the fact that he was circumcised on the eighth day. It was all part and partial of that whole way of thinking about approaching God on the basis of human achievements.

And so, that leads us on to what it had indeed become by the time of the New Testament. The whole idea of circumcision had come to be abused.

[9 : 02] Now, no longer was there the emphasis upon the spiritual reality of which it was a sign, but rather there was the emphasis on the physical sign itself, the physical reality, so that as long as people were circumcised, that was considered to be the important thing.

And that involved this commitment to keeping outwardly a list of rules and regulations, whether in the law or whether merely in Jewish tradition.

circumcision. And it's that kind of thing that, of course, the Apostle Paul speaks about in the New Testament. For instance, in the passage we read in Romans chapter 2, verse 25, circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.

If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even although you have the written code on circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

So he makes the point here that the real circumcision is that that is inward and of the heart. Now, if we think that that is some kind of novel teaching in the New Testament, it is not so, because when we go back into the Old Testament, we discover that exactly the same kind of emphasis was being made there.

[10 : 29] The emphasis, as I mentioned already, circumcise your hearts. It was recognized in the book of Deuteronomy, it was recognized in the prophets that it had to be an inward spiritual transformation and commitment.

And so the Apostle Paul, in the New Testament, in his letters, is very clear in pointing out that this was the problem with the Jewish religion at this particular time, for which he came himself, and this was what was not been recognized by those Judaizing teachers who were coming along to the church in Galatia and trying to draw them back into the whole Jewish way of thinking.

But of course, the major point here is this, that circumcision now had absolutely no value whatsoever.

Now, why was that? It was because the Lord Jesus Christ had fulfilled the law. Everything that the law stood for, everything that the law represented, the Lord Jesus Christ had fulfilled it.

He had fulfilled all the ritual of the Old Testament. He had fulfilled it spiritually and in reality. he had fulfilled the sacrificial system and he had fulfilled the covenant obligations on the part of the people of God by rendering perfect obedience to God.

[12 : 04] And since Christ came and his work was completed, there was now no longer any value in the whole sacrificial and ritual system of the Old Testament.

rather, now had come that day prophesied in the Old Testament, the new covenant, the time when God would circumcise the heart. And that is what the Apostle Paul is teaching on the basis of the Old Testament prophets, on the basis of what Jesus taught and what Jesus achieved, he is teaching now that the day of circumcision is past.

So then, that seems to be quite clear. from what the New Testament teaches. But what has that got to say to ourselves today? We may say, well that's all very interesting but it concerns things long ago, apart from the fact that it may be of relevance, say, in terms of Jewish evangelism or outreach today.

But it seems to be something that is not all that relevant to most of us. But of course it is still relevant. We can apply the same principles to our own situations.

Because you see, the very same tendency that existed there in Galatia with these Judaizing teachers exists and has existed throughout the history of the church.

[13 : 27] There is always the tendency in the human heart to lay the emphasis on the physical or on the traditional or on the ritual instead of upon the spiritual, instead of upon what the emphasis of the New Testament is.

And that's true, we may say, in various traditions. We can see it perhaps very obviously in something like the Roman Catholic tradition, where there is great emphasis on ritual, where there is great emphasis on the ritual of the mass, or there is great emphasis on the ritual of baptism and the belief in baptismal regeneration, that actually being baptized, going through the ritual of it, actually makes the person a Christian, or Christianizes them, or Christens them.

Now, we know we're familiar with that same kind of idea, not just in the Roman Catholic Church, but also within what remains, we may say, of the Protestant Church.

These ideas are totally contradictory to the main emphasis of the New Testament, which is that there has to be a spiritual work done in the heart of individual people, ritual, and no ritual, not even the ritual of the sacraments that God has commanded and given through Christ Jesus, not even these rituals, change the heart in and of themselves.

It is a work of the Holy Spirit of God, resulting in true and real faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. So, we can see that it can apply in a whole variety of ways in that kind of area, and we may apply that not only to something as we've done like the Roman Catholic tradition, it applies to ourselves and our own kind of tradition.

[15 : 15] The same kind of almost superstitious belief exists within our own tradition, certainly about baptism. But baptism in and of itself does not make a child a Christian.

It is only the sign, the New Testament sign, of the covenant. And we must lay all the emphasis upon our spiritual obligation, our spiritual obligations to bring up the child in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And all the emphasis on our spiritual obligation to have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and to encourage that child to have faith in the Lord Jesus.

So, you see, that is but just one example of the kind of thing that can still exist today, the same kind of emphasis that existed there in Galatia, the same kind of emphasis that we see still in our own time.

Because there is this propensity of the human heart to lay the emphasis where it ought not to be laid. To lay the emphasis on the things that are peripheral and secondary and not on the things that are central and primary.

[16 : 28] And especially to lay emphasis on things that simply become in the end an empty and a vain tradition. That's what Jesus called the teachings of the Pharisees in regard to these kinds of issues.

Empty and vain tradition. Now, we ourselves may be prone to some of these things and laying these emphases where they ought not to be laid. We may take a pride in our particular tradition, whatever it is, in the outward distinguishing mark.

whether we're free church or some other denomination or whatever, and this gives us some kind of status.

Now, is that the kind of distinguishing mark that we think of when we think about the fact that we belong to a church, or when we think about the Christian faith?

Well, if it's so, if that is so, then that is not the kind of distinguishing mark that the New Testament speaks of. New Testament speaks rather of different kinds of marks, distinguishing marks.

[17 : 43] One distinguishing mark has been called the mark of the Christian is, of course, love. Love for the Lord Jesus Christ and love for his followers and love for other people.

All the world will know that you are my disciples if you love one another. So there's a distinguishing mark. But that's not the distinguishing mark that we're thinking about here in this passage, in verse 17, although it comes, I suppose, as a result of it or an aspect of it.

But in verse 17, we read that the Apostle Paul speaks about bearing in his body the marks of Jesus. scars. But then is this distinguishing mark or these distinguishing marks that the Apostle Paul had?

Well, it seems, I think, reasonably clear that he's speaking here about physical marks or scars.

scars. And we know that the Apostle Paul would have had many physical marks and scars on his body. How do we know that?

[18 : 57] Well, we know some of the things that happened to him. We know, for instance, in this very area of Galatia, in Lystra, he was stoned and left for dead.

In other words, he was so seriously assaulted that people thought he was dead. His body would have been battered and bruised, perhaps even broken bones, we don't know.

But he certainly would have had scars and marks on his body. We know, too, on other occasions he was beaten. And to be beaten in those days didn't mean just some kind of slight or trivial thing.

It meant being really injured. And so, again, he would have had scars on his body. But you may say, well, what kind of link does that have to what we're talking about here?

Well, the link it has is that these can properly be described as marks of Jesus. Why? Because the Apostle Paul received those marks or those scars, not because he was a criminal, not because he just set out in life to be an antisocial element or a troublemaker.

[20 : 15] He received those scars and those marks because he loved the Lord Jesus Christ and he sought to serve him. That's how he received those marks.

He was going about the work of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. he was going about the work of the gospel. He was going about the work of evangelism and church planting when he received that kind of treatment because there were those who hated what he was doing.

And especially, again, it came from those very same people that we've been talking about, the people who believe in the ritual and the tradition and so on as an outward thing.

And they saw that the apostle Paul was destroying completely what they represented. And so wherever he went, even throughout the Roman Empire, they pursued him and they stirred up trouble amongst the Greek and amongst the pagan people against Paul and what he represented and what he taught.

And so these marks and these scars can very properly be described as the marks of Jesus. They were received in service of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[21 : 34] And there are some passages in some of the other things that Paul writes that shed some interesting light on this and how he thought about it. For instance, in Colossians chapter 1 and verse 24, Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's affliction for the sake of his body, which is the church.

Now that is such a strong statement that it could very easily lead to misunderstanding of what Paul is saying. We could misunderstand him to be saying that, well, what Christ did by way of suffering for our atonement wasn't complete and the Apostle Paul added something onto it.

Now we know that that is not at all what the Apostle Paul means because everything the Apostle states concerning the work of Jesus Christ indicates its completeness and indicates that there is nothing to be added to it.

But what he is saying here is not that he is going to add anything by way of atonement to the sufferings of Jesus. But rather those who follow Jesus are also going to be persecuted and opposed and are going to suffer as Jesus suffered.

And there is still suffering to be completed in the experience of the church. Those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

[23 : 05] So you see again he speaks of the same kind of thing. And similarly in 2nd Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 5 he speaks again of this kind of suffering.

For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives so also through Christ our comfort overflows. He is making a comparison here between suffering and comfort.

But the main point for our purposes this evening is he stresses the sufferings of Christ overflow into the lives of those who follow him.

In other words those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ will be persecuted and opposed as he was.

And the more closely we follow him and the more faithfully we do follow him the more we will suffer that kind of abuse. But then there is something even more that we can draw from this in this letter to Galatians in chapter 2 and verse 19 we read there and in the following verses why this is so.

[24 : 25] For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 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. I do not set aside the grace of God for if righteousness could be gained through the law Christ died for nothing.

In other words he is speaking of this great identification that there is between Christ and those who are in Christ, those who trust in Christ.

The life that he now lives in the body he lives by faith in the Son of God. I no longer live he says but Christ lives in me. So whenever he suffered, whenever he was opposed because he was preaching the gospel, that suffering came as a direct result of his intimate connection with Jesus Christ.

And so it is very right and proper to describe these marks in his body as the mark of Jesus. Jesus. Now again we might ask, well, what relevance does all that have to us here sitting comfortably this evening in Bonacord Church in Aberdeen?

[25 : 46] It is very unlikely that the police are going to break in here and start beating us, as perhaps they might do in other countries of the world. church. It is very unlikely that a mob is going to meet us when we go out of church and start beating us up because we are Christians.

Well, it is very unlikely at the present time that these things happened in the past in this country and there is no reason why they might not happen again in the future. But still, these things are relevant to us.

Because if we are faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ, we will suffer consequences. They may not be the very dramatic consequences and the very physical consequences that the Apostle Paul suffered.

He may not be stoned or beaten in that sense, but we will suffer injuries. They may be more psychological injuries. They may be hurts that we suffer in our minds and in our relationships with other people because we seek to be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so this has still got relevance to us. You see, we do get scars in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Think of that great description given by John Bunyan in the Pilgrim's Progress concerning the death of Mr.

[27 : 15] Valiant for Truth. Then said he, I am going to my father, and though with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am.

My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me to be a witness for me that I have fought his battle, who will now be my rewarder.

Very interesting statement that, and I think possibly John Bunyan was thinking of a passage like this in Galatians chapter 6. My marks and scars I carry with me.

Now we know that the marks and scars of the Lord Jesus Christ, the marks in his hands and his feet, were carried with him through death into the resurrection, into the new and glorified body.

And we are persuaded still exists in the human body of the Lord Jesus Christ, glorified in heaven. For he is there described in the book of Revelation as a lamb as it had been slain.

[28 : 36] But there is something akin here, we may say, although perhaps not exactly akin, in what Bunyan is describing in the death of a saint of God.

Marks and scars carried with us, not now as injuries, but as honours, because they were suffered in battling for truth, battling for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now we may have all kinds of scars and hurts and injuries. We may have them because of our own fault, our own foolishness, our own frailty, our own sinfulness.

But we may also have scars and hurts and injuries because of our faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ. These may be just as real as physical ones, though they may be psychological ones and emotional ones.

And yet, if these are suffered in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ, then they are honoured. They are marks of honour and distinction.

[29 : 49] And so, we ought to regard one another. Because, you see, there is a tendency, I suppose, in every one of us to think that, well, if we are in the church and we are amongst Christians, we should be amongst perfect people.

But we are not amongst perfect people. We are amongst people with all kinds of sins and hang-ups. But we are also amongst people who suffer and suffer injury and hurt in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we ought to so regard one another. You see, the apostle here appealed to the people of Galatia and he says, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

He is making an appeal to their Christian charity and love. But they will remember his weaknesses. They knew it. He had suffered while amongst them.

There is some indication that he had been physically weak and ill while amongst them. we read in chapter 4 about an illness in verse 13 that he speaks of and again in the following verses we read that they had loved him so much at that stage that they would have torn out their own eyes and given him their eyes.

[31 : 10] Perhaps his illness manifested itself as something to do with his vision. We don't know. But the point is that the apostle Paul suffered in these ways and they knew that suffering.

And at that time when he had been amongst them preaching the gospel to them, establishing their churches, they had had a tremendous love and respect for him. And he is appealing to them to continue that.

Not to listen to these false teachers who are trying to draw them away from the love of the Lord Jesus Christ. And he is appealing to them to continue to have respect and love for himself.

so we today ought to have that same kind of love and respect for one another. You see, we may all have our different weaknesses and our hurts and our scars.

And as we get to know one another, we should learn to know about these things and to be able to alleviate one another's suffering in these regards and to respect one another's weaknesses.

[32 : 18] not respecting weaknesses in the sense of condoning any kind of sinful attitude, but being sensitive to one another. So then, what are your distinguishing marks?

Are they the kind of just empty, outward marks or rituals or traditions that the apostle condemns in terms of the Jewish attitude to circumcision?

All are the things that distinguish you, things that show that you are committed to the Lord Jesus Christ, that you're marked out as somebody who has fought the Lord's battle and may have suffered because of it.

That is a distinguishing mark worth having. scars that are honorable, and these are scars that will redound to the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ when one day we will meet him.

Let us pray. our gracious and loving Heavenly Father, we praise your name for your grace and your sensitivity towards us, in touching us with your love and in laying your hand upon us.

[33 : 48] We thank you for every person here this evening who knows that love of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we thank you for those who have sought to be faithful in fighting for the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we know that it is a costly business so to fight. We pray that you would help us to be sensitive to one another and to understand one another's weaknesses and difficulties.

we pray gracious Lord that you would bind together the people of God in this place. We pray that you would cause us to be united in the work of the gospel.

And we pray that you would help us as we deal with Christian people wherever we come across them in this same way, loving one another as you have loved us.

We pray that more and more you would enable us to examine our own ideas and our own traditions and whatever thing may be dragging us down or preventing us from doing your work.

[35 : 07] Lord we pray that you deliver us from being like those people whom the apostle Paul had to confront in his days, who were loving outward and physical things rather than the inward and the spiritual.

Oh Lord we pray for that ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our own hearts and lives, changing us, moulding us, making us more useful in your service. We pray that tonight you would bless your own word also to those who as yet do not know you, but who know that they are invited to come to you.

Oh Lord we pray that they may not be afraid to come, knowing that there is one who loves them and who promises never to leave nor forsake any who come to him.

We pray that they may this evening close with that offer of the gospel in Jesus Christ. Now we ask all of these things in Jesus name and for his sake.

Amen. Now we close by singing in Psalm 51 verses 14 to 19 the tunicent minver number 122 O God of my salvation God me from blood guiltiness set free.

[36 : 40] Then shall my tongue aloud sing of thy righteousness. Psalm 51 from verse 14 to the end to God's praise. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of you now and forever.

Amen.