

Congregation, during my years in the CRCA, I have seen many families as well as individuals, start the Christian race with zeal and great enthusiasm. Yet over time, they have tired and no longer seem to be running the race, but have slowed to walk and some have even withdrawn from the race altogether. I am not suggesting that they are lost to the world or the devil forever, but I do have some serious concerns for them. And I wonder, what tripped them up? What caused their love for the Lord and his wonderful salvation gained for them through his death and resurrection, to wane and peter out?

If there is one thing we need as Christians, it is constant encouragement to stay focused on our wonderful salvation in Christ for that gives us purpose in life. If our wonderful salvation doesn't drive us to run the race with zeal, then nothing will. In fact, it won't take all that long before the attractions of this world will trip us up, and drag us away from the race. The Apostle Paul often likens the Christian life to a sporting event. One of his most familiar references is to athletics, and particularly running.

In Acts 20:24 we read, "...I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." In 2 Tim 4:7, nearing the end of his life he comments, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith"

So why do some people who start with gusto pull out of the race? It seems to me that perhaps one reason is because they see the Christian life as a sprint and not a marathon. The Apostle Paul feared that for the Galatians. They had started well. When they initially heard the liberating gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, they were delighting in their newly found freedom.

Yet, note Paul's comment in v7. "You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?" It almost seems as though runners in the next lane had cut them off. It wouldn't be the first time we have seen runners get cut off and even tripped up during a race and it all ending in tears. However, running for a gold ribbon or even a gold medal pales into insignificance when one considers that Christians are running for joy. They have received the good news forgiveness of sins and eternal life gained for them through Christ's death and resurrection.

Yet Paul says that they were hindered from obeying the truth. The truth being that salvation is found in Christ alone and not in their works, particularly referring to circumcision. This wonderful truth of freedom in Christ needs to be practiced. Our faith needs to work itself out in loving obedience. Paul has been telling the Galatians that they are justified by faith alone in Christ alone. And the evidence of that saving grace is our faith expressing it self in love.

A faith that saves alone should never stand alone. Faith alone works because the Holy Spirit creates a desire to now live for your Saviour. This is our theology coming to life. If we claim to be saved through faith alone then live as someone who now knows what it means to love God and the fellow man with a selfless love. So often I hear people saying, "We understand what it means to be saved through faith alone and by grace alone in Christ alone, but how does that now find expression in our lives?"

Allow me to answer that by quoting Jesus. Jesus said, "This is how the world will know you are my disciples, that you will love another!" So feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner, make a pot of soup for the family in need, visit the sick, stop your filthy language and course joking. Stop looking at the world and its attractions, but keep your eyes on the author and perfecter of your faith!

In our text, the Judaizers had cut in on the Galatian Christians for they were the ones who wanted to add the Law of Moses to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul knew that this teaching didn't come from the One who had called them into Christ (Gal. 5:8). In Ch 1:6, Paul had already mentioned that God had called them into the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. It wasn't anything they deserved. It wasn't based on their works or foreseen faith. It was God's gracious gift to sinners who repent.

There was nothing gracious about the message coming from the Judaizers, for their message was about keeping the law rather than believing and obeying the gospel. Instead of lightening the load, they burdened God's people with all sort of additional rules and regulations, not least having to be circumcised to be a proper Christian. The Judaizers message was that salvation came by adding human works to Christ's work. Obviously, such a message could not possibly come from the God who calls sinners by his grace.

On the contrary, it came from the father of lies, the devil himself, for it was full of legalism. And so Paul warns the Galatians by quoting a well known proverb. "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." This proverb came from the bakery. Bread does not rise unless the dough contains an active culture of yeast. But a pinch is all it takes. In the same way, a pinch of law as a way of salvation thoroughly contaminates the whole gospel. Paul is drawing on OT imagery.

When the people of God prepared for the celebration of the Passover, they always made unleavened bread. And if anyone ate what is leavened during that period, that person was to be cut off from Israel (Ex. 12:15; cf. Deut. 16:2–4). The "yeast" of the Judaizers was to add works, particularly circumcision, to faith as the basis for justification. Paul recognized that all the trouble the church was having came from this single error. This tells us something about theological error. Like yeast in a loaf of bread, if you get a point of doctrine wrong, it generally affects everything you understand about the Christian faith.

I always tell my listeners that false teaching often doesn't sound so false when you first hear it. The devil doesn't smack us in the face with false doctrine, but usually disguises it with a Christian veneer. I remember a senior Bible Study I was leading, and I always started with some trivia questions. And one question I asked was this, "Are we saved by grace through faith, in Christ, guided by Scripture, to the glory of God?" Now some would say, "Sounded alright to me!" The Judaizers also said they needed to be saved by faith in Jesus and by grace, but the very thing that was missing was the little word "alone" and that little word makes all the difference.

Because if you don't insert the word 'alone' you can add circumcision and baptism and Lord's Supper and reading a particular Bible version, and a whole lot of other things that make your salvation dependent on works rather than in faith alone in Christ alone. This little bit of yeast in the guise of circumcision, may not seem like a big deal, but if the Galatians allowed themselves to be circumcised, the yeast would permeate through the church. And if not checked, before long they would all be denying that they were saved by faith alone in Christ alone, all by grace alone. More than that, they would deny the sufficiency of Christ's atonement.

Well, Paul was confident that the Galatians would come to their senses and reject the legalism of the Judaizers (v10). And this confidence was not so much in the Galatians themselves, but in their Lord who had called them in the first place. Paul also taught that, once we are saved, the Lord will not let us slip back into a 'works' salvation, but complete what he has begun in us.

Paul was equally confident that whoever was confusing them would pay the penalty (Gal. 5:10). Whoever they were, they would have to answer to God for causing trouble in the church on Judgment Day, for that what the word penalty is referring to. I must say, that I used to get all heated up towards people who deliberately introduced heresy into the church and I still do a bit. But over the years I have learnt that it is God's Church, and a) God will keep his people, and b) he will deal with the troublemakers.

For Paul, if the Judaizers wanted people to become circumcised, he wished that the knife would slip and they would end up castrating themselves (v12). His sarcastic words sound rather savage to the postmodern, politically correct ear. Obviously, Paul was getting a little agitated himself. The apostle was not actually threatening the Judaizers with violence. However, by saying what he did, it could be implied that he was saying to the Judaizers that they should be cut off from the church and join the cults that insisted on such mutilation at that time.

Now we admit that v12 is somewhat vulgar and offensive, but what is more offensive and we shouldn't lose sight of it, is that God does not help those who help themselves when it comes to salvation. Over the years I have come across all sorts of Christians and some are offensive for lots of reasons. Some tend to be selfish, insensitive, rude, and even violent.

Christians are all of that, and worse, but even if we were not so offensive, our theology still would be. Christianity is offensive because it insists that salvation comes only by the grace of God in Jesus Christ and the world doesn't like to hear that. And if you wanted an example, look no further than Paul. At various times and in various places—including Galatia—Paul had been beaten, arrested, imprisoned, stoned, and left for dead (2 Cor 11:15ff).

Why did this keep happening to him? Simply because Paul preached salvation by faith alone in Christ alone. And the proof was in the persecution he received for not preaching circumcision, or more to the point, preaching faith alone in Christ alone. Paul preached Christ was crucified for sinners for their forgiveness and resurrected for their justification. This is what Paul had preached to the Galatians from the beginning. He clearly portrayed to them "Jesus Christ . . . as

crucified" (Gal. 3:1). To preach the cross is to preach salvation in Christ alone. It is to preach that only his sacrificial death is sufficient to atone for sin. It is to preach salvation by his infinite worth rather than by our own unworthy merits. As the old hymn so rightly puts it, "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling!"

It's either the cross or its works! You cannot have both. If you accept works, Christ will be of no advantage to you (Gal. 5:2) for you end up with a cross-less Christianity. "Works for salvation" and "Christ alone for salvation" are mutually exclusive. Every preacher and every Christian must choose. Do we work for our salvation or do we trust solely in the cross? Law or grace? Works or faith? Do you want to be popular or do you want to be faithful?

The problem with preaching the cross is that it has a way of offending people. To preach Christ crucified is to invite ridicule, opposition, hardship, persecution, and perhaps even death. Paul called this phenomenon "the offense (or if you will, the scandal) of the cross" (Gal. 5:11). People were scandalized by what Paul said about the crucifixion. In fact, as it was then it is today, the cross often trips people up. They are happy to listen to an explanation of the gospel, but when you say to some people that Jesus had to die for them on the cross, it trips them up.

Because what it says is that they are sinners and need a Saviour. And they don't like hearing that. They don't like to admit that they need saving. And so they say, "Jesus may have died for the murderer or rapist, but not for do-gooders like me! Why would I need someone to die for my sins?" The cross is the great leveller when it comes to salvation. Every thought of personal achievement is cut down. Every deed done or not done is set aside.

What people mostly dislike about Christianity is the exclusive claim of the crucified Christ. The only Christianity they will accept is based on a Christ without a cross. I have said it several times that we need to be winsome, but that doesn't mean we can never be offensive. The problem with most Christians is that we don't know when to be offensive. We so desperately want to fit in with our culture. We want to be liked and we don't want to offend anyone. However, if we are not careful, we may end up getting rid of the very thing that is supposed to offend people, Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

Of course, that doesn't mean we have to be any more offensive than we have to be. We should never add our own personal offense to the offense of the cross. The cross is offensive enough! But if Christianity must offend people, then let it be the cross that offends them. For where else can people see that they are sinners, and where else can they meet the Saviour?

May the cross not trip them or any of us up as we continue the marathon. May our thinking never be that we need to add something to Christ's work to earn God's approval not trip us up! So tell, me are you running well? The give thanks. And just in case you are inclined to boast about your perseverance, your running, consider this. If it were not for the refreshing and nourishing work of the Holy Spirit, applying the wonderful truths of Scripture to our souls, many of us would have ceased running along time ago.

Have you stopped to a walk? Stop looking at the world around you. Don't covet your neighbour. Don't even start belly button gazing and start castigating yourself for all the wrong you have done! Don't be tripped up by that! Remember the broom illustration. Look to Christ, and remember the wonderful forgiveness and salvation you have in Him. I pray that it may spur you on. Amen.