

“Running a good race.” (14)

Usain Bolt, the Olympic gold medal runner, was on his way to a club with some friends. At the door, the bouncer turned to him and said, ‘Sorry, man, you can’t come in here ‘no denim.’ Bolt was quite annoyed at this and said, ‘don’t you know who I am? I’m Usain Bolt.’ The bouncer replied and said, ‘then it won’t take you long to run home and change, will it?’

Usain Bolt holds the world record as a part of the 4 x 100 metres relay team and holds both the 100 metres and 200 metres records. He’s the reigning world and Olympic champion in these three events and he’s widely considered to be the greatest sprinter of all time.

Now the reason I shared those facts with you is because running is what the apostle Paul is going to talk about today. And he’s going to emphasise the struggles we face when we’re running towards our goal. Galatians 5:7-9 “You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.”

Now notice the word, ‘were’, it’s past tense, Paul says the Galatians started off the race great because they had the right goal in their sights. And Who was in their sight? The crucified Christ was in their sight. Galatians 3:1 “Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.”

But at this point in time, they took their eyes off Jesus and were heading on a dead-end road which would only lead to destruction. You ask any athlete and they will tell you the worst thing you can do in a race is look behind you, you have to stay focused on the finish line. You see, Paul knew all too well what he was talking about and just before he died, he wrote to his young friend Timothy.

And said in 2 Timothy 4:6-8 “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” Paul saw life as a race, not in the sense of finishing first but in terms of completing the race.

When the Olympics were held at Mexico City an African marathon runner named, John Stephen Akhwari won over the hearts of the world, not because he won any race but because of what he did during his race. You see, he fell during the race but continued to run and long after the winners received their medals and the crowd was gone, this runner plodded on toward the goal. A news reporter stayed until the injured runner hobbled across the finish line and said to him, ‘you didn’t have to do this,’ ‘Why?’ The runner answered, ‘My country didn’t send me 5,000 miles to start the race, but to finish the race.’ He started off like any other runner and despite falling and coming last, he ended up being one of the heroes of the Olympics games that year.

Paul says the Galatians started off great, they were running a good race, but something happened, someone has cut in on you. Now again we can picture athletes running in a stadium and as they’re running someone cuts in on another runner. Paul says the Galatians had been cut in on by someone who had pushed them out of their running lane. They were now headed in the wrong direction, and would be disqualified if they continued on their present course.

But who was it, who cut in and hindered them in their race? It was those legalistic Judaizing teachers who had infiltrated the fellowship of the church. These teachers were diverting the churches toward their own beliefs. Acts 20:29+30 “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.”

These legalisers were in the church and they were hindering the spiritual growth of the churches. And loved ones, legalistic thinking and behaviour always hinders spiritual growth. Paul reminds them that God had called them through the Gospel. Paul wanted them to know that they were now being called into something where neither the calling nor the teaching originated from God. And we all know that any call that doesn’t lead us to trust in God, is a call to destruction.

Now the figurative use of leaven is sometimes used in the Bible to refer to the influence of good. But here Paul uses it in terms of something bad, really bad. He says that the influence of a few Judaizing teachers who were in the churches, were actually influencing the members to follow their legalistic doctrine. And if their influence wasn’t stopped, it would flood the entire church of southern Galatia.

We know how leaven works, it's slow, but persistent. And it's the same with the influence of legalism among Christians, it's slow but persistent. So, we must never forget that we're saved through grace and faith, not by the things we do in terms of trying to get salvation by our own deeds.

These legalisers were putting on a show, look how often I pray, look at how often I fast, I know the Bible better than you do. And they took pride in their religious performances. But loved ones, it's all a show, it's all pretence, it's pretending to be spiritual, when it's not.

And we can very easily be led into legalism because outwardly it looks and sounds impressive. But outward submission won't save anyone, it's inward submission to the grace of God that does. Manmade rules and regulations doesn't produce anything in us, whereas grace works on the heart in order to produce the fruit of the Spirit. That's why Paul said in **Romans 7:4** "So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God."

And so, because Paul knew how the leaven of legalism works and causes so much damage to churches, he tells the Galatians to stop it from spreading. Loved ones, like Paul, when we see any kind of legalism entering the congregation here, we too must stop it immediately. But it will take courage, it will faithful men and women to stand against it.

And yes, like Paul, we will get intimidated, but we have to stand against it, otherwise it'll spread throughout the church and people will end up following a different gospel. They will end up off the running track, heading in the direction of losing their salvation. This is exactly what Peter was condemned for, when he was in Antioch. He was intimidated by legalistic brethren, and because of fear, he submitted to their influence.

Galatians 2:11-14 "When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?" Loved ones, let's keep our eyes on Jesus and don't let anyone cut in on us as we run towards Him.

Now the Galatians may have started off well and slowly gone of course but Paul has some good news. **Galatians 5:10** "I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty." Now notice whom Paul put his confidence in, 'the Lord'. In other words, Paul recognised the power of the word of God and because of that power found within the Word of God, he encouraged them to stick to what God's Word says.

What Paul is doing here is what he would eventually do with the elders of the church in Ephesus, that is, commend them to the word of God that would build them up. **Acts 20:32** "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

And so, Paul had confidence in the church of Galatia that they would respond to the letter he was writing. He had confidence that they would reject the influence of the legalistic teachers in their midst. You see, legalistic religion arises in the church only when other Christians don't know their Bibles well enough to see the difference between Bible and opinion, or Bible and traditions.

There was this tea-totalling mother who was very vocal from time to time about her theory that only grape juice, not wine, was served at the Lord's Supper. During one of these discussions her daughter said, 'But mother, don't you remember at Cana Jesus turned the water into wine?' The mother, eyes blazing, said, 'Yes! And He NEVER should have done it either!'

That's why it's so important to read and study our Bibles, that's why it's important to come together as a church for regular Bible studies. The more we study together, the more we learn together and the more we learn together, the more we will be alert to any false teaching that comes along. And notice the warning Paul gives to those false teachers, he says, 'they have a penalty to pay'. Anyone who leads the sheep astray and gets them to follow them, by intimidating the sheep to believe that his opinion or interpretation is the only and correct opinion or interpretation.

Those who would steal the sheep of God in that way, will receive their just judgment. **And what is their judgment?** Their judgment will be destruction from the presence of God. **2 Thessalonians 1:7-9** “This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.”

Those who cause trouble in the church with their divisive opinions and legal demands will be troubled by God in the end. And that’s one reason why all preachers and teachers must be very cautious about how and what they teach. **James 3:1** “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”

Any preacher and teacher has got the ability either to lead people to Christ or lead them to destruction. So every sermon ever preached, every lesson ever taught, has to be prayerfully thought through before they’re presented to anyone.

Now what exactly were these legalisers saying about Paul? **Galatians 5:11+12** “Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!”

They were saying, that Paul was still preaching the need for circumcision. And to bring this accusation to a halt, Paul simply asks them a rhetorical question. If he were preaching the doctrine of getting right with God by works, then **why was he being persecuted by those who were teaching the same thing?**

Now remember in the early beginnings of the church in Jewish regions, those who were converted to Christianity came under great persecution by the Jews. Some of the Jewish converts compromised their belief in the grace of God by complying with the social or cultural demands of their culture. But in doing so, they made circumcision a necessity for salvation and part of the law of Christ.

Now why would they compromise? Well, possibly because of the way that we compromise today. They compromised because they wanted to get away from the stigma of social rejection on the subject of circumcision. We can’t imagine what it would have been like if you were a Jew and you converted to Christianity. Excommunicated from the temple, you were seen as unclean and no Jew would have anything to do with you.

If you were working, the chances are, you would lose your job because you gave up on Judaism. If you were married to a Jew and they didn’t become Christians, they could legally divorce you. You could lose your wife, your job, your friends and social standing, all because you became a Christian. And so, to a degree we can understand why many non-Jewish Christians went along with being circumcised. And we can understand why many Jewish Christians went along with the idea of believing that circumcision was needed for salvation.

But what about us, **do we still compromise our faith today?** Maybe you’re at work and someone starts a filthy joke and instead of walking away, you stay there and listened and laughed at the joke. **Isn’t that a compromise?** Maybe your shopping in the supermarket and one of your friends says something that is absolutely blasphemous towards God but you don’t say anything. **Didn’t you just compromise?**

Or maybe you find yourself in bed with somebody you shouldn’t be with, in a place you shouldn’t be and for a couple of hours of physical pleasure you compromised your faith. Maybe you’re watching the television on your own or with the kids and a film comes on which is filled with swearing and sex but instead of switching it off, you watch it to the end. **Didn’t you just compromise?**

Someone once said, ‘popularity is the most dangerous spiritual state imaginable, since it leads on so easily to the spiritual pride which drowns men in hell. It’s a symptom to be watched with anxiety since so often it has been purchased at the too heavy price of compromise with the world.’

You see, we’re living in a world that wants us to compromise with it. **And the world says things like, ‘oh, I would believe in Jesus if you guys would just let women preach on Sunday mornings.’ ‘I would definitely bring my children to worship, if you had instrumental music to help keep their minds active.’ ‘I would love to become a Christian, if you guys didn’t take the Bible so seriously’.**

It was Peter Marshall, a Scots-American preacher who was first to say these words, ‘if you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for everything.’

Loved ones when you stand up for what is right and don’t compromise with the world, people will get offended. And when we as Christians start to rely on ourselves for salvation, rather than relying on what God has done, that’s offensive to God. Paul says, the offense of the cross is that we must reject the notion that we can save ourselves by the outward religious things that we do.

This is exactly what these legalistic Jewish Christians were struggling with. Instead of relying on the cross for salvation, they were relying on their own religious system. **1 Corinthians 1:23** “But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” Now remember that the Greek word for ‘stumbling block’ is the word, ‘skandelon’, its where we get our word ‘scandal’ from. The whole idea of a crucified God was scandalous to the Jews, and they would regularly persecute anyone who thought that salvation comes by grace and faith and not human works.

Paul says these teachers were agitators, who continually caused tension in the church. They were what we would call the ‘church police’, they were the watchdogs who constantly argue about opinions and interpretations in order to intimidate the church into conforming to their religious assertions and commands. And because they were causing such disturbance in the church, Paul used a graphic word here in order to explain what should happen.

He said, ‘I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!’ In other words, he wished that there would be a slip of the circumcision knife and that they would mutilate, or emasculate themselves. **Deuteronomy 23:1** “No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the LORD.” According to the law, these people wouldn’t be permitted to enter the assembly of the Lord.

The word, ‘emasculate’ is the word ‘apokopto’ which means to amputate, mutilate, to castrate. In other words, they must be ‘cut off’ from the fellowship of the church, in order that their leaven stops spreading among the faithful. They must be cut off in order to restore peace and harmony among those who trust in the grace of the cross.

These are the kind of people Paul writes about to the church in Rome. **Romans 16:17+18** “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery, they deceive the minds of naive people.”

These are the kind of people whom John writes about in **2 John**. **2 John 9+10** “Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them.” In other words, these legalistic Judizers were going beyond what was written as **1 Corinthians 4:6** says.

Loved ones, Paul got fighting mad when people start to add or take away from the Gospel of salvation. He got fighting mad when he saw people cutting in on those faithful Christians who were running a good race. He got fighting mad because these legalists were stealing souls and leading them to destruction.

It’s my prayer that we will protect and encourage each other to continue to run a good race. That we will stand up for what’s right and not compromise our faith with anyone and for anything.