



Walking the Way of the Cross with Paul

SESSION 4

I have been crucified with Christ.

Introduction

In session 1, we considered two passages in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Galatians 6:14–15 speaks of the world being crucified to Paul, and Paul to the world by means of the cross of Christ. Because of Jesus' crucifixion, Paul no longer relates to the world as he once did; it is dead to him and he is dead to it. Instead, he lives in a new creation. We also saw that Galatians 5:22–24 lists the "fruit of the Spirit," a sketch of life in this new creation, and associates this transformation with having "crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."

In this session we'll take up those passages in more detail, and connect them together by looking at Galatians 2:19–20, where Paul speaks of being "crucified with Christ." Throughout Galatians, Paul clearly sees the cross of Christ as transformative for himself and for all believers; and he evidently thinks in terms of *participating in Christ's crucifixion*. Rather than enforcing an external moral code on themselves, believers experience transformed living by being joined to the crucifixion of the Messiah. We want to understand how Paul sees the cross of Christ as a means of spiritual transformation, bearing in mind that in biblical terms what is "spiritual" is not purely internal and invisible but manifests itself in actions and relationships.

Crucified to the World

In Galatians 6:14–15, Paul writes, "The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." These words have been a catchphrase for innumerable Christians in the

Today's Scripture

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! (Gal. 6:14–15)

centuries since Paul wrote them. Some have lived lives of spectacular renunciation, "wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground," as the author of Hebrews says about Old Testament heroes of faith (Heb. 11:38). Others have gone on mission or led reforming movements. Yet many others, no doubt, have taken this as the motto of a life lived largely unnoticed in selfless dedication to a task or a cause, or simply to God and God's ways.

As dramatic as the expression is, being crucified to the world doesn't necessarily mean abandoning daily life for the monastery or the hermitage. The great twentieth-century monk and hermit Thomas Merton wrote that while some become hermits in the mistaken idea that they can find sanctity only by escaping from other people, if you seek that kind of escape "you will find neither peace nor solitude; you will only isolate yourself with a tribe of devils."¹ If you are not crucified to the world that is *within yourself*, in other words, it does no good to flee the outer world. In a similar vein, 1 John says, "Do not love the world or the things in the world," but it then goes on to define "all that is in the world" as

“the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches” (1 John 2:15–16). Loving “the world,” in this sense, means *loving our own desires*.

It is neither the world as God created it nor the world of human society to which Paul says he has been crucified. He does not recommend that we “go out of the world” (1 Cor. 5:10). Rather, as we saw in session 1, “the world” in this sense refers to much the same reality as “the flesh,” namely, the self-centered and self-seeking impulse within everyone that resists love for God and for other people. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh” (Gal. 5:24)—an idea that we will explore below. It is this preference for ourselves and our own desires above all else—above the needs of others and above our relationship with God—to which Paul says he has been crucified. Freedom from this inner compulsion is the beginning of all freedom, especially the freedom to act in the world in accordance with God’s vision for human life.

Renewed fulfillment of that vision is the flip side of being crucified to the world. “New creation is everything!” (Gal. 6:15b). Freed from a world that revolves around us, we are able at last to live in the new world centered on God our Creator and Redeemer. The transformation that Paul sees in the life of faith has both negative and positive aspects. There is a reality from which we need to be liberated, a reality represented by terms like “flesh” and “world” and “sin” that we need to shed through the cross of Christ. But there is also another reality *for* which we need to be liberated—the “new creation” opened up for us by the cross and the Holy Spirit. In that reality believers “live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them” (2 Cor. 5:15). There is a new center, a new focus, a new constant reference point. It is now Jesus the crucified Messiah who gives direction and meaning, shape and content to what life is and is about.

The cross of the Messiah is a turning point not only in the history of God (session 3) but in human history and in the life stories of believers. It is a point of transformation, and re-centers attention away from self and onto God. Paul sees this transformation as occurring through participation in the cross of Christ.

Crucified with Christ

Galatians 2:11–21 presents a complex argument (one of many within the overall argument of Galatians), and we cannot go into it in detail. Suffice it to say that here Paul is introducing his main point in Galatians, that the Torah (law) is no longer the basis for right relationship with God, now that God has sent the crucified Messiah Jesus.² The true basis is no longer deeds prescribed by the Torah, but faith (or belief) by which believers are “justified,” restored to a life of righteousness and right relationship with God.

The faith or belief of which Paul speaks here is traditionally translated “faith in Jesus Christ.” In recent

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decades, however, quite a number of scholars have argued that the Greek phrase in question should be translated “the faith *of* Jesus Christ.” The difference is significant: it would have Paul saying not, “We are justified by having faith in Christ,” but, “We are justified by participating in Christ’s own faith in God.” Good reasons can be given for both versions, and each of the two translations can be understood in more than one way. For our purposes, perhaps we can draw on both. Paul sees transformation as occurring through participation in the crucifixion of Christ, which is part of being “in Christ.” By participating in Christ’s righteousness and faith, his right human relationship with God, we join in that right and righteous relationship ourselves. We do so by *believing*, which means not only accepting the truth of a statement (such as “Christ died for our sins”) but also *trusting* the God who offers this new relationship and Jesus the Messiah who establishes it. We might say that we participate in the faith *of* Christ by having faith *in* Christ. In the words of L. Ann Jervis, “Faith in Christ allows believers to become righteous and faithful as Christ is.”³

In Galatians 6:14–15, Paul contrasts new creation with circumcision, the ritual by which men fully enter into God’s Torah-based covenant relationship with Israel. He treats this (and other “works of Torah”) as part of

the world to which believers have been crucified (see session 1). So it is that in 2:19, in laying out his main point, he says that he has “died to the [Torah].” Death and life are starkly contrasted here: Paul is dead to the Torah in order to live to God; crucified with Christ, he no longer lives at all, but Christ lives in him, his human life lived “by faith in/of the Son of God.”

The life-and-death issue is that of relationship with God. How is it established? How is it maintained? For Paul, the Torah had stood as a mediator, a kind of tutor for God’s children (Gal. 3:19–26). In Christ, however, believers have a direct, unmediated relationship with God. The children of God, having the Son of God living in them, relate to God without an external mediator standing between them and God. Having died to Torah through their participation in the Messiah’s cross, they now live to God by faith, because of the crucified and risen Messiah living in them. Participation in the cross of the Messiah, being “crucified with Christ,” also means participating in his resurrection life: “it is Christ who lives in me.” This divine life and power within

idea, try substituting “executed,” “electrocuted,” or “hanged” for “crucified.” However metaphorical your use of such terms may be, you cannot really forget the deadly actuality to which they refer. When we read Paul’s words about being “crucified with Christ” or “crucified to the world” or having “crucified the flesh,” we need to stay mindful of the drastic nature of the metaphor that he is using.

Knowing that the Messiah experienced this horrible death, Paul declares that God, acting through the Messiah and the divine Spirit, has brought out of this death a dynamic and radically new mode of human existence, a “new creation” that has the power to transform those who participate in it through faith. This is part of the profound paradox of Christian belief. The most powerful nation in the known world executed a prophet and teacher, and his execution (we claim) unleashed a new kind of power, transforming people away from the power-centered values of “the world” toward the life of a new creation centered on love and self-giving. To be crucified with Christ is to be filled, paradoxically, not with death but with life lived on brand-new terms.

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characterize the new relationship with God in the new creation. The presence of Christ within the believer and the believing community enables a new, direct relationship with God, powered by the eternal life with which Christ, risen from the dead, now lives.

Wonderful as this is, we must also realize (remembering what crucifixion was) that participating in the Messiah’s crucifixion was an alarming and even frightening idea. Paul uses the same verb to say that he is “crucified with Christ” as the Gospels use to speak of the bandits who were crucified with Jesus.⁴ Though Paul, like other New Testament writers, is beginning to use the cross as a religious symbol, neither he nor his first readers could have lost sight of the reality of crucifixion as an instrument of Roman domination. To get the general

Crucifying the Flesh

In Galatians 5:16–26, Paul contrasts Spirit and flesh, each of which is a source of desire in human beings. He also contrasts Spirit and Torah, which may be thought of as sources of guidance. The Spirit, then, is an alternative to the flesh and its wrong

desires, but also to the Torah and its good guidance.

Our starting point in this study is 5:24: “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” Participation in the cross of Christ, just as it brings about death to the world and to the Torah, also brings about death to “the flesh.” As noted in session 1, when Paul speaks of “the flesh” in this way he doesn’t mean simply the body. The “works of the flesh” (5:19–21) include not only obvious bodily sins involving sex and alcohol but also what we might call “spiritual” sins (idolatry and sorcery) and a long list of *interpersonal* sins having to do with hostility and disunity. It is not the body that is at fault for these things. Rather, it is human self-centeredness and determination to get our own way at any cost to other individuals and to the community.

This is what Paul symbolizes by “the flesh.” It is this inclination, this set of headstrong longings, that is crucified when we “belong to Christ Jesus,” when we participate in his death and everlasting life.

Just as “the flesh” is not simply the body, so also “the Spirit” does not relate only to the inner life of the mind and heart. Love leads off the list in 5:22–23, along with joy and peace, and these are to some extent interior qualities. But it’s important to remember that in the New Testament, and in the Bible generally, love is not just a matter of emotion but of thought and will. It includes affection and regard for the other person, but it is also a mind-set and a way of acting, not only a feeling. Not surprisingly then, most of this list too consists of interpersonal actions and attitudes (including peace). The Spirit counters the self-centeredness of the flesh and brings about “patience, kindness, generosity” instead of “enmities, strife, jealousy.”

Lists of vices and virtues like this were common in the moral teaching of the ancient world. But Paul does not speak of these as traits that can be suppressed or developed through hard work and discipline. Love, joy, and so on are not a matter of law, of Torah, but are “the fruit of the Spirit.” Note that he does not say “fruits”! Each item is not a separate “fruit.” The Greek word translated “fruit” (*karpos*) means a product or produce; it is related to the English word “harvest.” All these things *taken together* are the “harvest of the Spirit.” They are generated not by our own efforts, so that we could boast of them as our achievements, but by the Spirit working within us. Remarkably, even self-control is not under our control!

Guidance by the Spirit contrasts with being subject to Torah (5:18): rather than an external authority standing between us and God, we have God’s own Spirit within us bringing forth this harvest of love. In 5:24–25, as in 2:19–20, life and death contrast sharply: we “have crucified the flesh,” and we “live by the Spirit.” These forces, not

our own will, are responsible for our transformation. “Belonging to Christ” is both participation in his cross and sharing in the new life that entered the world through his resurrection, empowered by the life-giving Spirit (Rom. 1:4; 8:2, 10–11; 2 Cor. 3:6). A terrible engine of death, the cross, has become the source of life by the will and power of God, and those who live from it live no longer in the way of the crucifiers but in the way of the Crucified, blossoming with love, patience, and kindness under the gentle driving force of the Spirit within.

Sharing in the Cross

Paul’s vision of salvation is powerful and dynamic, and the way he expresses it can be obscure. It is a gift from God, and it leads to eternal life. But it also involves transformation in *this* life, an internal shift of focus and allegiance leading to external changes in our way of living. Sharing in the Messiah’s cross, we die to what seemed like life. Renewed in relationship with God by the life-giving Spirit, we enter new creation.

About the Writer

David Rensberger is a writer and retreat leader based in Decatur, Georgia, who continues to teach occasional New Testament courses at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta and Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur. He has written books and articles on the Gospel and Letters of John and on Christian spirituality.

Endnotes

1. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 52.
2. As in session 1, I prefer the Hebrew word “Torah” over “law” because it reminds us that the issue in Galatians is how to live in relationship with God. Within God’s covenant with Israel, Torah defines that relationship, and the issue Paul debates in Galatians is whether that definition applies to non-Jews who have converted to the new Jewish sect of Christianity.
3. L. Ann Jervis, *Galatians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 23.
4. Matt. 27:44; Mark 15:32; John 19:32.