

# True Freedom: The Essence of Christianity

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] a couple of weeks ago Matthew Paris who is a columnist for the times and the spectator he wrote an article in the times called Anglicanism was never really about God just a couple of weeks ago Anglicanism was never really about God by Anglicanism he means the church of England and the article was subtitled rather than seeking new converts Welby who's the the archbishop of Canterbury Welby should cherish his aging flock who care more for ritual and music than doctrine and then Paris writes in the article Anglicanism was never meant for the doctrinaire he says I don't believe in God but I love the church pay my subs to all saints and Elton sing hymns and delight in the testaments old and new I say my prayers every night not because anyone is listening but because I always have cathedrals fill me with wonder graveyards with reverence and it goes deeper I love both the story and the person of Jesus who I'm convinced was a real and wonderful man albeit under a serious misapprehension about paternity he goes on there are millions like me this is the church of England we want to be part of if semi-detached it's intimately and separately associated with bricks and stones and windows ritual and music theologically and challenging with a certain mild muzziness as to doctrine and a sharp distrust of zeal I always love reading Matthew Paris he is an atheist unashamedly he's an atheist but he's often good and sharp and pointed and what he says but actually here he misses the whole point of

Christianity he misses the essence of the Christian faith because Christianity isn't about ritual or mild muzziness as to doctrine because what we discover in our reading in Galatians chapter 6 is that Christianity is about the cross of Christ the cross of Christ is a doctrine so Christianity is about what you believe concerning Jesus and what he has done because if we don't understand the doctrine of the cross that will never grasp Christianity we won't have a clue about what is at the heart of the Christian faith now most people do like the consolations of Christianity they want to know that the church is always there when you need it it's there for births and for weddings and for funerals for hatches and matches and dispatches it's there to serve the community it's there to do lots of good work but we don't really want the cross of Christianity we don't really want to hear about this message about Jesus Christ who died for our sins and it's not just secular people who'll say that either this also comes from within the institutional church plenty within the church don't like or want the cross of Christ but unless we get that the cross of Christ is the very essence of Christianity then we will never see its incredible power to transform people people like you and people like me all we'll be left with is a weak and a false and insipid a vanilla kind of Christianity Christianity that's got no power to change anyone or in fact do anything and that's why Paul here in these verses emphasizes the centrality of the cross as he concludes his letter because it's the cross of Christ that completely changes us that's what he says it makes us a new creation it makes us a whole new person and so just see how Paul signs off there verse 11 he says see what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand now Paul's practice was to dictate his letters to a scribe or a secretary and then he would sign them off himself and his signature was meant to authenticate the letter to prove that it was genuine and here Paul in his final words he writes with large letters now some commentators suggest this might be because he had bad eyesight or because he had big clumsy handwriting perhaps but I think it's more likely that he writes here with large letters for emphasis it's a bit like us if you like using a massive font size bold highlighted capital letters because Paul wants the Galatians to pay attention to his final words because they're important what they needed to do was to reject false Christianity and to believe true Christianity what they needed to do was to not listen to any of the nonsense of the false teachers instead they needed to get the message of the cross of Christianity and see how it applied to their lives and so what Paul does in these final verses is he contrasts the false teachers with their emphasis on circumcision with his own emphasis on the cross of Christ and so this is really a summary of everything he said in

Galatians because what distinguishes false Christianity from true Christianity is the cross of Christ whether back then or now and so two points this afternoon are quite simple false Christianity first of all verse 12 and 13 and then true Christianity verse 14 to 18 because false Christianity we see rejects the cross to avoid persecution whereas true Christianity boasts in the cross and is prepared to face persecution so first of all let's look at false Christianity which rejects the cross to avoid persecution so the Jewish false teachers we've heard about them if you've been tracking with us through Galatians they rejected the cross because they wanted the Galatian Christians to be circumcised and they were implying by doing so that Christ's work on the cross wasn't enough it was insufficient and if you were to be a proper Christian then you needed to be circumcised as well as having faith in Jesus but there was more to it than just an enthusiasm for circumcision what Paul does here is he exposes their selfish motives so what he says is that they wanted to avoid persecution verse 12 and second they wanted to be popular verse 13 so there's persecution and there's popularity so the persecution first of all in verse 12 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 so the false teachers ignored the gospel if you like they were so focused on circumcision and the reason was they wanted to avoid being persecuted it's as if they were afraid of what their fellow Jews would think about them or say about them and what they did was they gave the message of Jesus this distinctly Jewish twist Jewish flavor by insisting on circumcision and I guess they didn't want to upset the people that they wanted to keep in with because the reality is that anyone who preaches the cross of Christ or the true message of Jesus that we find in our Bibles anyone who does that instead of a watered down version of Christianity that Matthew Paris would like anyone who preaches the cross of Christ invites persecution it is far easier and you will get less hassle if you promote a false version of Christianity that is socially acceptable that is what people want to hear because most people are generally happy to put up with church they're happy to put up with religion they're even happy to have Christians wandering around that's all fine just as long as they're there to help and just as long as they shut up about Jesus Christ and his cross then everything will be fine because if there is anything that people hate it is Christians who talk as if other people need to change their lives and listen to the message of Jesus and yet you never really grasp true Christianity unless you feel the offense of the cross but what is it about the cross that is so offensive well the cross smashes our human pride because it tells us that we are all sinful people it tells us that all of us aren't right with God we're all rebels when it comes to God we rebel against him and God made us and so that's a problem and the problem is our sin and because we sin against God by rejecting him then we deserve hell and there's no way that we can save ourselves all the good things that we do in life will never be enough to connect us to God and that's why we need Jesus Christ to save us and so we've got to put our faith in him and that is a massive insult to be told that you have got no hope of making yourself acceptable to God especially if you view yourself as a good person and surely God would accept me

I mean come on look how good I am and isn't that why the world loves outward religion whether it's circumcision or rituals or traditions or buildings or music or ceremonies or good works or whatever because we can take pride in the things that we do or in the places that we go and feel good about ourselves and so you get religious people saying how dare you suggest my religious observance and my good works count for absolutely nothing I take offense at that but you also get secular people who say how dare you suggest there is anything wrong with my life or that I am accountable to God or you get liberal people who say how dare you suggest that all those people who follow other religions need Jesus Christ to get to God so can you see how the cross of Christ offends everybody but just in different ways and so if we haven't wrestled with the offense of the cross we haven't really got it if we don't hate the message or love the message if the message isn't really bad news or really good news then we've missed the message altogether and so if you want to avoid persecution just avoid talking about Jesus' death as our only hope for being accepted by God and that is what the false teachers in Galatians avoided and it is what false teachers continue to avoid today because false Christianity will always reject the cross it will avoid the cross to avoid persecution because the message that says you can't do it you can't get to God yourself whether it's through circumcision or whether it's through your own efforts it's never going to sound appealing to people no one is ever going to take offense if you say you have it within you and you are able by what you do to get to God nobody is going to be offended by that message but to proclaim a message that says salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone invites

persecution but also false Christianity rejects the cross not just because of persecution but because of popularity everybody loves to be popular verse 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 this is odd the Jewish false teachers wanted to boast about how many people they had persuaded to get circumcised and yet the irony is for all their insistence on doing this as part of observing the law they themselves couldn't keep the law because nobody can keep all of God's law it's impossible and so Paul's saying circumcision doesn't do anything for you anyway except for the cause pain in getting it done that's why these false teachers they were riddled with hypocrisy it's because their motives in ministry were all wrong they wanted to be popular and the measure of their success was to chalk off how many circumcisions they'd had and that was their reason for boasting but the desire to be popular and to boast about your followers wasn't just their issue it's still an issue today where churches still like to boast about their popularity or their public profile and of course it won't be the number of circumcisions that they performed last year but it will be measured in other ways like in the number of followers that they have on social media

[ 13 : 35 ] or the number of staff or the number of trainees or the number of church plants or the number of views on YouTube or perhaps belonging to the right tribe or the right network perhaps just the ability to schmooze certain people or maybe even the ability to make people hate you a kind of notoriety for all the wrong reasons these are all things that you can boast about and so it's no wonder here that Paul shames these false teachers for their behavior because they were an absolute disgrace they didn't really care about the cross of Jesus Christ they didn't want to make Jesus and his gospel glorious they wanted the glory all for themselves all they were interested in was their message which was warped and twisted their comfort their popularity and their avoidance of persecution now sadly you can still see these characters about today you find them within the institutional church there will be pen pushers in central administration there'll be convening committees there'll be standing in pulpits and there'll be sitting on Kirk sessions but in their desire to avoid any sniff of persecution they dare not mention the cross of Christ but if as the church we don't boast in the cross of Christ we'll just scurry around boasting in everything else that this world values whether it's people popularity celebrity status or whatever we will try to curry favor with the politics the people or the powers that be of our day and yet a Christless Christianity isn't true Christianity it's false it's fake it's counterfeit and it's worth nothing it's all style and no substance and so it's never going to change anyone's heart okay so Paul switches from false Christianity to say what it is like to true Christianity to say what it's like and so secondly true Christianity boasts in the cross and faces persecution we see this in verse 14 to 18 now the contrast between the false teachers and the apostle Paul could not be more extreme so verse 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 so while the false teachers were boasting about circumcision

Paul was boasting in the cross of Christ he didn't care about popularity ministry wasn't some kind of ego trip for Paul and so what does it mean to boast then it's a strange phrase we might think it's odd that he would use this word boast John Stott in his commentary in Galatians says this it means to boast in glory in trust in rejoice in revel in live for the object of our boast or glory fills our horizons engrosses our attention and absorbs our time and energy so to boast in something essentially is to have that thing as the most central thing in your life it is what you live for it is what you breathe for it is what you exist for it's what you give your time and your money thinking to that's what you boast in and so for Paul what he's saying here is the cross is what he boasts in in other words the cross means everything to him the cross of Jesus

Christ matters more to Paul than anything else in this life because it was on the cross that Jesus Christ the son of God died for a sinful man like Paul and when Paul got that he realized there is no greater thing that anyone can do for me than that the son of God should give his life and that is why the cross is your only ground of boasting if you profess to be a Christian how is it that I a helpless guilty sinner can be accepted by a just righteous and holy God it is only through what Jesus has done on the cross for me and it's not through anything that I could ever do but it's through what Jesus has done and that's why Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians because they were being deluded into thinking that God accepted them through their human efforts faith in Jesus plus circumcision and observing the law and so Paul is forcing them here to choose what they're going to put their trust in for salvation what are they really going to boast in what is going to be central in their lives was it going to be the circumcision of their flesh or was it going to be the cross of Christ

because it couldn't be both circumcision says you can achieve your own salvation good works you can do it yourself whereas the cross says no you can't

Jesus is the only one who can do it for you you've got no hope without Jesus and isn't that why the message of the Galatians is ever relevant because it gets to the very essence of Christianity and how you and I relate to the God who made us so I will either boast in what I have done I will take pride in my achievements as a human being whether because of my education my job my family or whatever I'll take pride in all of this and think that I am a good person before God or I will boast in what Jesus has done for me I'll realize that I am desperate and helpless and sick and sinful and it needed the Son of God to come into this world on that very first Christmas to live the perfect life that I could never live to then hang on a cross in my place as my substitute to bear my sin you see there's two ways of relating to God one is our way and the other is

God's way and God's way is through the cross of Jesus Christ because when we put our faith in Jesus Christ then we are united with Jesus in his death and so when Paul says here in verse 14 the world has been crucified to me and I to the world he's talking about our union with Christ when we are united to Christ we no longer belong to the world so the world here doesn't mean the people of the world Paul's talking about the values of the world he's talking about the world that is against God and is dominated by sin Paul's already said that the flesh has been crucified in chapter 5 verse 24 and now he's saying that the world joins the flesh on the cross both have been crucified and so Paul's saying that the world is dead to him it doesn't appeal to him anymore it doesn't have any influence over him or power over him the world has nothing he needs because he is everything in Christ but also

[ 21 : 16 ] Paul says that he is crucified to the world in other words he is dead to all the attractions of this world so he doesn't care what the world thinks about him it doesn't matter how many followers he's got on twitter or instagram because when you're united to Christ it is not the world that gives you your identity it is Jesus Christ who gives you your identity and so as those who profess faith in Jesus Christ our identity is in him and so what matters is not who we are in the world's eyes or how other people see us what matters is who we are to God and to God with Christ and being united with him we are his children and so can you see everybody has got something to boast in everybody needs to live for something there needs to be something that gets you out of bed every morning and so what is it everybody needs to find their confidence their strength their self-worth their identity from somewhere and so it will either be in what we do and in what we achieve and in how we perform that will be our boast or it's going to be in what

Jesus has done how he has performed on the cross for us that's what Paul expands on in verse 15 he says neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything what counts is the new creation he's saying circumcision is irrelevant when it comes to salvation it's an outward thing it's a human action whereas becoming a new creation is an inward work that is performed by God the Holy Spirit Paul describes this also in 2nd Corinthians chapter 5 where he says therefore if anyone is in Christ the new creation has come the old has gone the new is here so becoming a Christian isn't about picking up a few more good habits so that you can feel better about yourself it isn't about becoming more religious about taking on more traditions or rituals in your life

Paul's saying here to become a new creation means Christianity is a complete transformation a transformation from the inside it's often called regeneration where this recreation within us is done by the Spirit of God who gives us a new nature and new desires new desires for which to live where we're being transformed into what God wants us to be and we do what God wants us to do and so the outward sign of circumcision has got nothing to do Paul says with inner regeneration that's why Paul shows that false Christianity with its focus on the externals whether it be circumcision religious performance rituals ceremonies buildings whatever he says that doesn't count for anything only true Christianity transforms a human life and that's why the cross of

Christ is the foundation of everything it is the rule that we must live by which is what he says in verse 16 peace and mercy to all who follow this rule to the Israel of God so the rule is the good news of the cross and God's people are to live by this rule and when we do live by this rule then we find peace and we find mercy and we belong to the Israel of God and Paul isn't referring here to Jews as the Israel of God the true Israel of God are all of those who have faith in Jesus whether Jew or Gentile they're the true children of Abraham they're the true heirs of all of God's promises God has only one family and anyone can be welcomed into that family by faith in Jesus and his death on a cross and so isn't that good news for all of us and you need to hear that if you're new to

Christianity or if you're exploring all of this stuff it is good news to know that you don't need to go to church for another 60 years before you will be acceptable to God you don't need to clean up your life first before God will welcome you to himself you need to do any physical thing to your body before God will take you all you need is to receive what Christ has done on the cross by faith and then you belong to him so don't think that you need to go through a whole load of hoops or a big long process to become a Christian you can become a Christian today you can become a Christian right now God will accept you if you put your faith in Jesus Christ and that's what Paul was prepared to suffer for verse 17 from now on let no one cause me trouble for I bear on my body the marks of [ 26 : 46 ] Jesus what does that mean well he is talking here about his suffering for the sake of Jesus he endured suffering for telling people about Jesus and his cross Paul faithfully proclaimed the cross wherever he went and because he did he had the scars to prove it because proclaiming the cross or living out the way of the cross will inevitably result in persecution and even if that persecution isn't physical like Paul's it is a reality that we will suffer for following Jesus and you'll know this if you've been a Christian for any length of time if you've never known this then I guess you've yet to discover what it really means to follow Jesus it's fascinating that the hallmark of the Jewish false teachers was circumcision that's what they looked for that's what they boasted in it was the circumcision of the flesh but Paul saying if there's a mark on your flesh that shows you belong to God it certainly isn't circumcision that isn't your badge of honor it is the marks of Jesus it is the suffering and persecution that you face for him that proves that you are his that you belong to God and that's what comes when the cross of Christ is your only boast when it is front and central of your life because when you grasp all that

Jesus has done for you and his suffering and death on the cross then you're ready to go out and follow him to go the way of the cross no matter what it costs and it might cost going across the street it might cost going across the world but that's what happens when the grace of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ sinks deep down into our hearts and that's surely why Paul ends on grace verse 18 the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit brothers and sisters amen Galatians ends with grace Galatians began with grace Galatians all the way through is about grace true Christianity is grace we're saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone and we continue to live by grace too and we need it every day we need grace for salvation and we also need grace for continuing in the

Christian life and we experience this grace through the cross of Christ so when we see Jesus dying in our place in my place for my sin so that I can be accepted by God and we put our faith in him our lives are transformed forever we're different people on the inside and then on the outside and that is the essence of Christianity and so the cross of Jesus Christ will never mean anything to us if we don't get this so does the cross of Jesus mean everything to you today or does the cross of Jesus mean nothing to you which is it for you because it's the difference between being deluded by a false version of Christianity there is no good to anyone it's the difference between that and delighting in true Christianity and delighting in the warm embrace and warm welcome of the loving God who made us and who sent his son to be our saviour don't walk past the cross of Christ another day don't avoid Jesus Christ for a better life run to Jesus Christ know forgiveness full and free and then live out the gospel of grace each day knowing that God is for you and not against you