

Crucifying Control

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[0 : 00] I'd like us to turn back to the chapter that Grant read for us. Let's read again verses 19 to 20. Our title for our sermon this morning is Crucifying Control.

If I was to ask you the question, what was Jesus doing on the cross? I think it's unlikely that any of us would say, well, he was crucifying control.

But what I hope we'll see this morning is that this is actually a crucial aspect of the gospel. And it connects very powerfully with a massive issue in our society today.

Because we live in a culture, and we have done for many years now, that is shaped by entrenched individualism. And you can actually see the development of that if you look back over history.

You go back and sort of scan the intellectual developments over the past two to three hundred years. You see that during the Enlightenment, there was this kind of ethos of questioning things.

Not just accepting whatever's passed on to you, but questioning things.

[1 : 18] Starting to think for yourself. That gave rise to really what we would call the kind of autonomous thinking of the modern period, where everybody just wanted to sort of go in their own direction.

That led on to an aversion to this idea that there's any overarching truth. And that's known as postmodernism. And all of that's culminated in the kind of dominant individualism that we see in our society today.

And that's why, for so many people today, if you'd ask them, where is ultimate authority found?

What is the ultimate priority? Where do you find ultimate meaning and identity?

And they'd all say the same thing. They'd say it's in the self. It's in here. And that kind of captures the individualism of the world that we live in today.

In many ways, what I want us to see today is that behind that can create emphasis on the self.

Whilst there are some aspects of it that are good and there are helpful elements to it, what I want us to see is that behind it lies an unrelenting thirst for control.

[2 : 24] And the result is that you can actually see today that many good things get used to exercise control over others.

So sometimes you'll maybe be in a situation where people will talk about their rights. Rights are a good thing. But people will use that concept of rights in order to gain control over a particular decision.

Lots of people today will put a lot of energy into their social media profile. And again, that's allowing you to have control over how you're perceived by other people.

And people will often talk today about a sense of identity, about their need to be respected, validated. And often, although aspects of that's good, often that can be a means of exercising control over how other people behave towards us.

And even maybe at a more general level, lots of us will have a fairly well thought out life plan. But again, often in that whole idea of a life plan is our desire for control.

[3 : 30] Now, all of these things are good things in lots of ways. Rights are good. Social media is good in lots of ways. Identity is crucial and good. A life plan, very good. They're not bad things. But it's so easy for people to use them as a means of exerting control.

And we do that because we like control. In fact, we long for control. And so we want control over our own lives. We want control over the environment around us.

And we even want control over other people. And so in the society that we live in today, control is cherished.

In the gospel, control gets crucified. And to help us see that, we're going to look at Galatians 2.

Now, the big issue behind this letter to the Galatians is the issue of legalism.

Now, Paul had preached to these Galatians. But after he had left them, he preached the gospel to them. They'd come to faith. A church had been planted.

[4 : 38] After he had left, others came in behind Paul and told these Galatian Christians that actually what Paul told them was not enough. And they actually need to keep certain laws in order to be saved.

And in particular, they need to keep some of the Jewish laws. And the kind of crowning example was circumcision, that they must still be circumcised. So these Greeks in Galatia, they've come to faith.

And these people are saying, oh, no, if you actually want to be part of God's people, if you actually want to be saved, you've got to be circumcised. And Paul's horrified at this. And he writes a letter to make it absolutely clear that legalism is not the gospel.

We're justified by faith and not by works. And so you see that again and again. At the very beginning, he says, I'm astonished that you are deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ. And you're turning to a different gospel. That's his big warning at the very start of the letter. Chapter 2, he speaks about how we're not justified by the works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ. [5 : 50] And then in Galatians 5, he speaks about how the gospel has set us free. So don't go back. Don't go back to submitting to the law. And he's saying here, if you accept circumcision, if you say somebody has to be circumcised to be saved, then you're saying they have to keep the whole law in order to be saved.

And he says, that's going to just sever you from Christ. You're falling away from grace. You're departing from the gospel. Legalism stands in direct contrast to the gospel of God's free grace. And as I'm sure you know, legalism has been a constant plague in the life of the church in the 2,000 years since Paul wrote this letter. But it's important to recognize that legalism actually has two aspects to it.

The first is slavery. Now, that's the obvious one. And in many ways, that's the first thing that we think about when we talk about legalism because we're saying, you know, you are bound to keep this set of commandments.

And the law immediately then functions as this brutal slave master. It's like, well, have you done what you need to do? Have you done enough? Have you kept this? Have you conformed? And what it results in is that our relationship with God, if it's based on legalism, it kind of just hangs in the balance.

[7 : 04] It's like, well, have I been good enough? Have I not? It's all kind of uncertain. And hanging by a thread. And this is the emphasis that Paul is primarily focused on in Galatians.

So you see it in lots of places. Verse 23 of chapter 3, he speaks about us being captive under the law. So that's the kind of slavery aspect of legalism.

He speaks about being redeemed from the law. So redemption is to be taken out of slavery. And as we saw a moment ago in 5.1, he speaks about the fact that Christ has set us free.

And so we must not submit again to a yoke of slavery. All of this is highlighting a key truth of the gospel. The cross liberates us from slavery to sin.

And so we're not saved by being hardworking slaves. We're saved by the free and amazing grace of God, whereby we're forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ.

[8 : 06] So one aspect of legalism is slavery. But there's another aspect of legalism that's much more subtle and every bit as dangerous. Legalism is not just about slavery.

It's also about control. People don't just become legalists because they look at God's law and they think, I have to do this.

And you're kind of bound by duty. People also become legalists because they look at God's law or they look at any other set of religious requirements and they think, I can do that.

I can do that myself. And I will. And that's actually the mindset of control. Because when we approach God with a legalistic posture, we're very, very much in danger of approaching God on our terms.

And if we have that set of rules, whatever it might be, whether it's in terms of reading this amount, praying this amount, waiting this to church, doing this or not doing this on a Sunday, whatever it may be, if we're setting this list of stuff, list of do's and don'ts, whatever it might be, we're actually dictating the terms to God.

[9 : 13] And that's us seeking to exercise control. One of the most famous legalists in all of history was a man named Pelagius.

He lived in the kind of fourth into the fifth century. He was British but based in Rome. And he was of the view that salvation was basically about everybody just being a good person.

Do good works, don't sin, and that will save you. And behind that heresy was the idea that we could basically save ourselves. And his doctrine of salvation was one of total self-reliance.

I can do it. I can be in control. And as we're going to see, this control aspect of legalism was at play amongst the Galatians.

And this is part of the reason why legalism is so resolutely condemned by Paul. Because the problem with legalism is not just that it's miserable, but it's also that it's actually arrogant.

[10 : 15] At the root of it lies this view that we can do it ourselves. We can do what's necessary for salvation. And behind that lies the idea of control. And so in the gospel, both of these aspects of legalism are totally defeated.

We are liberated from slavery by the cross. But at the same time, at the cross, the gospel crucifies our control.

Now, many people today will find that very off-putting. But what I hope we're going to see is that this is the best news you will ever hear.

And the reason it's such good news is for three reasons that we're going to look at very quickly. It's good news because our sense of control is an illusion. Our desire for control is harmful.

And our need for control can only be met in Jesus. So, one by one. First, our sense of control is an illusion. This whole subject of control is one where the basic impulses of our hearts are actually trounced by basic theological common sense.

[11 : 28] Because the basic impulses of our hearts is that we want control. So we want control over our lives. What we do ourselves. What happens to us. We want to control what we consider to be right and wrong.

We want to control what we're allowed to do. What we're not allowed to do. How we live. How we die. We want control over all of that. We also want control over other people. So we want to set the terms about how other people view us.

We want to set the terms how other people talk about us. We want to set the terms about how we can talk about them. And we even want to control God.

So we want God to do things according to our timing. And we want God to work things out so that our dreams will be fulfilled. And we want God in our lives.

But we don't want him to interfere too much. So we kind of just keep him to one side. And it's like, stay there. Don't mess with every single part of my life. Just keep to yourself. And all around us.

[12 : 22] And even in our own hearts. We do not want God to tell us what we can or cannot do. And so our hearts have this instinctive gravitation towards seizing control.

And yet that impulse of our hearts cannot withstand the most basic theological common sense.

Because it's a theological basic that God is in control.

Because he is the absolute of all reality. Nothing, nothing exists were it not for God.

And everything that's in existence depends on him. So it's a theological basic that God's in control.

It's an anthropological basic that we are definitely not in control.

Because if I compare myself to time and to matter, to energy, to the divine, I'm a speck. And it's ludicrous to think that I'm in control.

[13 : 29] And so what that means is that when we think that we're in control, we're believing a lie, we're chasing an illusion. And a great example of that is Paul himself. When he talks about his own conversion. He recounts this in chapter 1 and chapter 2.

He speaks about how he once opposed Christianity. He was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his people. And he persecuted the church violently.

And he tried to destroy it. So Paul thought he was fulfilling all the requirements of the strictest Judaism. And he also thought, I can eradicate this new sect that's kind of obsessed with Jesus.

I can sort it out. And in his fervent zeal for Jewish legalism. And in his violent persecution of Christians. He thought that he was in control. And then he goes to Damascus.

And Jesus stops him in his tracks. And Saul instantly realizes, I am absolutely not in control.

[14 : 28] And any idea that he was, was an illusion. And the same is true for us. Now, yes, there's lots that we can do to exercise control in aspects of our lives.

But overarching control is an illusion. So your career, you're not actually in control of that. You think about the things that have happened. Yes, there's some things that you have worked hard to do and you've managed to achieve. But there's other things that either have gone really well because of something out of your hands. Or other things that have gone really badly because of something out of your hands.

You're not in control. Your health, you're not in control. And how many of you have discovered that over the years where you're thinking, you know, I'll be careful about this.

I'll look after this. I'll keep fit. I'll keep healthy. I'll do it. And then all of a sudden, something that is out of your control completely changes your situation.

[15 : 32] And your life plan, my life plan, all the things that we think, I'm going to do this, I'm going to accomplish that, this is the way it's going to go, you're not in control. You're not in control.

And maybe most significantly of all, when it comes to love, so whether it's falling in love with the person that you want to spend your life with, or whether it's loving your children, or loving your parents, you're not in control.

Because love can never be in control. Because the minute you start to control how somebody else feels about you, it's not love. And so love, which we would all agree is like the most important part of our lives, is something that we actually are not in control over.

So often we approach life thinking, I have to be in control. But the gospel crucifies that idea. We're never actually in control. And that's why control is an idol, it's a false god, it's an illusion.

And the massive danger for us is that if we go through our lives thinking that we're in control, we're deceiving ourselves. And if we step into eternity thinking that we're in control, we're condemning ourselves.

[16 : 50] Our sense of control is an illusion. Secondly, our desire for control is harmful. Here we see the connection between legalism and control in the situation among the Galatians and this wider question of circumcision.

Paul recounts, as we read, a confrontation that he had with Peter. When it says Cephas, that's referring to Peter. It's just different names referring to the same person. Initially, Peter, he was a Jew, happy to eat with the Gentile converts.

Then, these kind of legalists come, Peter draws back and thinks, oh, I better not eat with them. And so these legalists, forcing additional requirements on believers, they were exercising control, Peter complies, and he does it out of fear.

But then, Peter's example leads others astray, even Barnabas gets sucked into it. Paul then, in verse 14, says that he rebuked Peter, and notice how he describes the situation.

He says, look, you are forcing the Jews, the Gentiles, to live like Jews. There's this exertion, whether intentional or unintentional, this exertion of control over the Gentiles in Peter's actions.

[17 : 59] And in it all, there's this desire for control, and through it all, everybody's getting hurt. It's all reinforced in the fact that our desire for control is harmful.

It's harmful for at least three reasons. One, it's harmful because it's very likely to leave us sinning. And at the very least, control can make us selfish and hypocritical. Paul speaks of hypocrisy there. At its worst, control can make us manipulative. What's bullying? It's an inappropriate exercise of control over somebody. And so it leaves us sinning.

Control is also, our desire for control is also harmful because it hurts other people. That's what you're seeing here. Peter gets led astray. Barnabas gets led astray. Everybody gets hurt.

And it can so easily happen to us. We kind of push through our own agenda, and often it can mean that people get hurt. It happens in families. It happens at work. It happens at school. It can even happen in church where people are like, it has to be the way I want it to be.

[19 : 07] And it doesn't matter if I hurt other people in the process. But most seriously of all, the reason this is most harmful, the biggest reason why this is harmful is what Paul says at the very end, that the demand for control that lies at the heart of legalism actually makes the cross look pointless.

And what Paul is saying to us here is that in terms of our salvation, if we seize control for ourselves, then we are immediately saying that the cross is not enough.

If we are saying you need to add a bit more, you need to require this, require that, then we are saying that the cross is not enough. And when we do that, it is just a return to slavery.

And Paul speaks about that in 17 and 18. It is the idea that if you think of the slavery that sin places us in, it is like a building around us. The gospel smashes that building. We are free.

But if we are then saying, oh no, no, no, we have got to do it like this, if we set the terms, if we bring in legalistic requirements, it is like you are just rebuilding what has been torn down and you prove yourself to be a sinner.

[20 : 13] All of it, in it all, we are harming our discipleship, we are misunderstanding the gospel. And this is so challenging for us because we think that the exercise of control is a mechanism for protecting ourselves.

It is not true. it is actually a mechanism for harming ourselves and harming others. And that takes us to our last point and our most important point that our need for control can only be met by Jesus. This takes us back to the words we started with 19 and 20. I want to focus on this magnificent phrase that Paul has in the start of verse 20, I have been crucified with Christ.

Now the I in that sentence includes a lot of things. It includes our sin. So when Jesus died, our sins placed on his shoulders. It includes our guilt. He's taken all the punishment that our sins deserve in his death.

And his death includes our death. And that's why the promise of the gospel is eternal life. Death, the power of death has been destroyed because Jesus died for us.

[21 : 27] All of this is tying in with what we call the doctrine of union with Christ, the fact that we're saved because we're united to Jesus in his death and in his resurrection. His death was our death and his new life is our new life for all who trust in him.

So the I in verse 20, that little I there includes lots of things and it definitely includes our claim to control. And we need to remember that there's two sides of the coin to being a sinner.

On the one side, we're guilty, we're helpless, we're weak, we can do nothing and we need God to rescue us and he does that through Jesus. But on the other side of the coin of being a sinner is actually the fact that we're rebellious, we're autonomous, we don't want to listen to God and we don't think that we need Jesus because we think that we are in control and if you're a Christian or if you become a Christian, that controlling, that control claiming self is nailed to the cross and crucified.

And this is telling us something crucial about the gospel. It's telling us that the gospel is a message of salvation and it's also a message of surrender. And so, we are saved and we are receiving from Jesus what we could never get for ourselves.

So, in the gospel, we're saved, we're receiving from Jesus what we could never get from ourselves. We're receiving salvation. but we also surrender and we hand back to Jesus what we should never have taken for ourselves.

[23 : 09] And so, the cross saves you from your sin and the cross crucifies your control. And as we said at the start, this is the best news that you'll ever hear. And the reason why it's the best news you'll ever hear is because of our first two points.

Your control was always an illusion. It was never real, never absolute. The control that gets crucified on the cross is a counterfeit. The control that we want to grasp and hold on to is actually far, far too big for us to handle.

And so, when we want to take control of our lives, we're trying to grab something that we can't carry. It's too big for us. And that's why our desire for control was always carrying a huge risk of harm.

We see that in society. We see that in ourselves. Trying to demand control means that we're deluding ourselves. Trying to exert control makes us oppressive. Sometimes it can even make people abusive.

And on the cross, that old sinful self that demands control and that dishes out control gets crucified. But the amazing thing is that that never for one second leaves us exposed and vulnerable.

[24 : 24] Instead, it leaves us under the perfect control of Jesus, our almighty king and our king who is always good.

And the key point is this. The gospel is not saying you must ignore that urge that you have to be in control. The gospel knows that we have that urge. The gospel knows that we need a sense of control in our lives.

The gospel knows that we long for control in our lives. The gospel is not saying ignore that. The gospel is saying you're never going to satisfy that longing on your own.

You're only going to find what you long for in Jesus. In other words, the gospel satisfies our longing for control because it unites us to Jesus and he is absolutely in control.

And so in the gospel, the I, who always wants to be in control, that I there, who always wants to be in control, in control, is crucified. And in its place, we're united to Jesus and the life-giving freedom of him being in control.

[25 : 40] And this changes everything so I want to be in control of my career. But I can't be. We can't be. There's too much that's out of my hands.

And so instead, I can place my career at the feet of Jesus knowing that he's in control. I want to be in control of my health. I never want to get sick.

But I can't be. We can't control that. Instead, you can cast your body and your soul into Jesus' hands knowing that you're forever safe with him.

And I want to control how I am viewed by others. I want to control how I'm loved by others. We can't control that either. And so instead, you can fall into Jesus' arms knowing that he will love you forever.

and, you know, we think this idea of losing control and not having control, like that sounds so bad to us. It's actually beautiful.

[26 : 47] I want you to compare two sets of parents of a toddler. Imagine you went around to one house and you went to the house. You saw this little two or three year old and the house is total chaos.

And the child is sitting there. They've got 40 packets of crisps open. They're stuffing their face in them. They're eating chocolates. They're just doing the toilet, whatever they like. Everything is higgledy-piggledy.

They're sleeping during the day, staying up in the night. Everything's a mess. And you said to the parents, what's going on here? And they said, oh, they're in control. I want to give them control.

Then you go to the next door house and you see a child who's thriving well cared for, healthy, happy, inquisitive, chatty, having fun and you chat to the parents and what do you discover?

They're controlling everything. Not in a nasty way or a cruel way but so that they can thrive. in terms of time and eternity, we're never the parent.

[28 : 10] We're only ever the toddler. And we need Jesus in control. We need to lean on him. And so, on the cross, control gets crucified.

And all of this reminds us that when it comes to control, we actually have two choices. Option number one, we are not in control, but we spend our lives fighting that even though we can ultimately never change it.

And option number two is we are not in control and so we commit our lives to Jesus. You're not choosing between being in control or not being in control.

That's a choice that no one has. None of us are in control. We're just choosing whose lives, we're just choosing which hands we're going to put our lives.

So, crucifying control is a key aspect of the gospel. Let's pray.