

# **Ravening Wolves Who Wreak Havoc**

**John Calvin**

*As many as desire to make a fair shew in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. For neither they themselves who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh. - Gal. 6:12-13*

It is not without good cause that God strongly exhorts those whose duty it is to preach the Word not to seek grace and favour in the eyes of men. He expects them to close their eyes to human opinions, so that they are not turned to one side or the other, or prevented from properly fulfilling their office. Indeed, we know it to be impossible for us to fulfil our office properly unless we fix our eyes upon God and turn our eyes away from men; for we can easily become corrupted if we do otherwise, and it takes very little to turn us one way or another. Yet the most important loyalty required of those who have the responsibility of preaching the Word of God is that they be not tempted, either through ambition or avarice, to speak to please and satisfy men. They must not be afraid of perils or dangers. For experience shows that, as soon as a man fears for his own skin, or else has an eye to his own profit, he will change in a moment of time.

It is true that those who seek to please men in this way are not demonstrating at that moment that they are evil or enemies of the truth; as indeed, our Lord Jesus shows in the tenth chapter of John's Gospel, where he makes a distinction between the hirelings and the wolves (John 10:12). Having spoken of good and faithful shepherds, who seek the common well-being of the flock, he says that there are ravening wolves, or thieves, who seek only to plunder everything, thereby wreaking havoc and confusion. These are people who fight openly with God, and strive and struggle to overturn pure gospel doctrine. However, there are others who run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, and who pretend to be serving God. Yet neither type edify us, not even through their zeal, for they are devoid of integrity. While it costs them nothing, they simply make a fair show. Indeed, so much so that we can often be deceived because we consider them to be ministers of Jesus Christ. However, they only seek the wages and are devoted to filling their own stomachs. This is why, when threatened, they immediately become fearful and they change and alter their approach. Yesterday they seemed to uphold the Word of God, but today they are bending over backwards here, there and everywhere. Why? Because they realise that this will gratify everyone, and thereby be more profitable to themselves.

This is why Paul now warns the Galatians that those who troubled them and led them astray from the right path were given over to their own ambitions; this is why they cast doubt on certain doctrines. Up to this point, Paul has used reason in his debating to show that if we put our complete trust in Jesus Christ, the ceremonies of the law are now superfluous. Their application was temporary; they were designed to show us that, if we are truly leaning upon the grace that was purchased for us by our Lord Jesus Christ, we must not seek justification in the sight of God through our merit or any other foolish notion. Paul has dealt with and settled this argument as far as it was necessary for him to do so. Now, in order that the simple-hearted will be moved even more deeply he comes and addresses individuals, saying, 'Consider why it is that these people with whom I here quarrel mix the ceremonial law with the Lord Jesus Christ. Are they motivated by zeal, or a desire to serve God? Not at all! They have more of an eye to their danger of being persecuted. Therefore, since fear makes them distort the Word of God, it is not necessary for you to make further enquiries or longer investigations into what kind of people they are, and if you can trust them. For you will see how quickly they change and alter simply because they would avoid conflict. Thus, being traitors to God by their fearfulness, do they

deserve to be believed, or to have people respect what they say?' This is Paul's aim here.

This teaches all ministers of the Word to have such constancy and faithfulness that they are unconcerned about whether the doctrines they preach are hated or whether they are pleasing to their hearers. They must follow their course, and not strike sail at the slightest sign of wind, nor must they sway like reeds bending here and there. Whatever changes and revolutions occur, whatever trouble and confusion arises, let them continue to serve God. In brief, we must practically apply that which we learnt earlier, which is that if we seek to please men, we are abandoning the service of the Son of God. This is the first point.

However, all believers can draw good, practical instruction from this passage. We are to be wary of those who seek their own profit and advantage, who desire the acclaim of others and want to be esteemed. For such people never have any stability. As I have already said, this may not be immediately apparent, because some are dupes; they even think that it is thanks to them that the Word of God does not appear odious, and is rather applauded. Therefore, they may appear to be on fire, and yet change their minds overnight. If there is some danger and they see that they are being prompted to testify to the Lord Jesus Christ, then they reveal their cowardice, and finally turn in the opposite direction, and turn their coat as the proverb says. Whatever happens, let us always be on our guard, that we might only trust those whose lives are upright, and who do not wander away when they see the world conspiring against them. Even when others are so possessed with rage that they seem to be about to devour them, and even when dangers are most apparent, they ought to continue steadfast and constant. In this way we can distinguish them as servants of God. But those who alter and are counterfeit, who first say one thing, then another (to escape the hatred of men and avoid suffering persecution), we must guard against so that we are not deceived or misled, for they are like deadly plagues. We cannot have any security or support unless we display the good judgment and carefulness that Paul urges us to have in this passage.

Now this message is necessary today. For why is it that so many hypocrites murmur as boldly as whores against the Word of God, and uphold such gross abuses as we see in the Papacy: the superstitions, the idolatries, the errors? It is because they know that if they do not keep the pot boiling, and hold on to certain things, they will simply starve! They also consider the danger of persecution if they uphold such doctrine. They see it condemned by princes and powerful people in this world; they therefore decide to keep themselves hidden away in the shade. This, I tell you, is why an infinite number of people disguise the truth of God, and falsify it; instead, they uphold many corrupt practices. The reason is that they do not wish to endure for the sake of Jesus Christ. It is true that they may not be Papists in the least degree, nor blaspheme openly against the Word of God; yet they desire to create another path, yes, made according to their liking. For they accuse us of being too extreme and too rigorous because we condemn those who attend Mass, and those who convince themselves that they do not worship idols! 'Come now!', they say, 'Provided that they do not have these things in their hearts, do we need to oppress them to the point of creating offence, and cause people to risk death over it? What reason can there be for this? Our life is precious to God, and even if we do commit evil, he will still pity us in our frailty!' Those who speak in this way show for certain that they are motivated by some other reason; that is, that they have noticed that the world is inflamed against us and that it seems we daily run the risk of sinking and perishing. This is why they draw back, and seek to operate as a separate group, when they see the impending danger.

However, because we see weak preachers running away from persecution, not wishing to suffer any conflict for the Lord Jesus Christ, bending and compromising only in order to enjoy peace in this world, we must pay all the more attention to Paul's warning here, and discern who are the true servants of Jesus Christ. They are people who have no thought for their own profit, who do not seek the applause of men, nor the best fare, nor the honours of this world. They are content just simply to do their duty, without concerning themselves about the kind of wind that is blowing, be it a tempest

or whirlwind, or be it calm, as long as they profit their hearers and maintain the doctrine that has been committed to them in all purity. If we follow that which is taught us here, it is certain that our faith will not waver. There are many today who do not know what they ought to do, and yet they say, 'I fear conflict and differences of opinion, and the strife that has to be faced in this world.' Some conclude that they must devote themselves fully to the Lord Jesus Christ, but there are others who follow a more gentle route, and who only desire a half-hearted transformation. Whom should I believe?

Simply open your eyes, for those who use such excuses are not seeking to follow the truth. They are quite happy to veil their turpitude, and to seek the flattery of others. But what do they gain? Satan is leading them to perdition, and they desire to follow him! Because they fear what will happen to them in life, they love the shadows, and devote themselves to pleasure and comfort. They must therefore receive the payment that they deserve. Those who deliberately become brutish in this way have been taken over by Satan, Paul declares, and now remain perplexed, not knowing what to do. They do not stop to think that those who simply preach the truth of the gospel are not to be pliable people, but to pursue their course without worrying about whether or not their doctrine is pleasing to everyone else. Since God has commanded them to speak, they do so. On the other hand, simpering people who say that we have to tread carefully and not 'swing beyond our hinges', who claim that it were better to be counterfeits, and double-minded; such people cannot be driven by zeal or affection for serving God. They do not consider either the edification or well-being of the church. In short, their only concern is that they might escape persecution, and retain their comforts; they do not want anyone to attack them. Now this is indeed worthy of note, for those today who remain in their nests and offend God have no excuse. Why? Because Paul gives us a sure mark which distinguishes the true servants of God from the hirelings from whom we are to flee; that is to say, those who seek only to feed their stomachs and enjoy the comforts of this world.

At this point, he adds 'lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ'. By this word 'cross', there is no doubt but that Paul includes all doctrine, and he is saying that it is very difficult to preach in all simplicity that which is contained in the Word of God, without encountering much conflict. For although God protects us (I am speaking about those of us who preach his Word), and has no desire to put us through trials so rigorous that our enemies come against us with drawn swords, yet it is still true to say that the world has never obediently accepted the gospel, and there have always been murmurers and opponents. Indeed, we still see them today, and shall continue to do so, for our Lord wants to test the faithfulness of his own, and ultimately demonstrate the invincible power of his Word, which overcomes all the obstacles reared up by Satan. As it says in Jeremiah, 'And they shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee' (Jer. 1:19). Thus, God is glorified when the world, together with Satan, makes its strongest efforts, and yet cannot prevent the truth from running its course.

For this reason, Paul says that these motley people, who disguise and falsify the Word of God, are running away from the cross. In other words, they are fleeing from the true message of the gospel, in order to avoid persecution. Once again, this is a badly needed warning for us. For if we desire to serve God and his church, we must always be prepared to undergo danger. Even though the fires are not lit, and the enemies are not armed to execute the cruel persecution that they would like to mete out (or rather, even though our Lord is restraining those who are furious with his Word, and who wish to throw off his yoke), yet we must, nevertheless, suffer the revilings of many people. We will be defamed; there will be murmurings and slanders against us; but let us breathe it all in and then harden ourselves against it, as it were. We see that wherever the gospel is preached, a thousand accusations come against those who seek to carry out their duty faithfully. They are put on trial, and accused of this and that, but it is all pure calumny. In short, all those who wish to pursue their course must prepare themselves to bear many trials; these would lead them to compromise, were they not determined to obey God despite everyone else. Here is one thing.

However, we ought to remember that this extends to the whole body of the church in general. When we hear the message of peace that is brought to us in the name of God, let us not expect to be at rest as regards this world, but always to have to deal with many quarrels and difficulties. If anyone is not prepared for this, he must leave the Lord Jesus Christ, for such a person can never be one of his disciples. As he declares with his own mouth, the one who does not bend his shoulders to carry his burden and his cross is not worthy to be in his school, and indeed all such are excluded (Matt. 10:38). Therefore, let us learn that, being called to the Lord Jesus Christ, we must share in his cross as much as pleases him; as it is written, that if we suffer with him, we will also be glorified and partake of the power which was revealed at his resurrection (Rom. 6:5). We must still have fulfilled in us, as members of his body, the sufferings that he first endured. It is true that he alone suffered what was necessary for our salvation, but we need to be conformed to his image, as it says in the eighth chapter to the Romans. However, even if God spares us from being amongst tyrants who could torture us, or evil men who could attack us, and he ensures that they only bark at us; yes, even if he leaves us in peace, it is because he pities our frailty and spares us because of our weakness. Let us not flatter ourselves in this meanwhile, but let us pray to God that through his Holy Spirit he would strengthen us. Then, when he calls us to line up ready for combat, we will not act like raw recruits, but will have premeditated long since the fact that we must share in the sufferings of Jesus Christ in order to reach the glory of his resurrection.

Paul, having thus spoken, now adds, in order to strengthen his argument, that those who are circumcised and who preach circumcision, do not keep the law, but they wish to glory in the flesh of those to whom they taught the ways of Judaism. In this passage, Paul is again accusing his adversaries of being double-minded people, in whom there is nothing but falsehood. Why? Before the coming of Jesus Christ, circumcision was a sign, much like baptism today. For the Jews knew that they were set apart by God as his inheritance. But those who mixed circumcision with the gospel fully believed that they too had to keep the law of Moses because it had been given by God and, therefore, must never be abolished. Thus the excuse they used was that circumcision was a sign that they observed the whole law. But here Paul reproaches them for not keeping the law at all. They were, therefore, deceiving God and man, because this was an exterior sign of something they were not doing; the very opposite was true! We can now see Paul's intention here.

With regard to this expression, 'keep the law', it is sometimes taken to mean accomplishing and observing all that it contains. No one can 'keep the law' in the sense that no one can perfectly accomplish all that is commanded therein. There is good reason for it to be referred to as an intolerable burden (Acts 15:10). Also, we know how weak we are, and the law reveals God's angelic standard of righteousness. How, then, is it possible to reach it? Therefore, no one keeps the law if we take this to mean perfect obedience which cannot be criticised. Believers, being governed and led by the Spirit of God, keep the law, that is to say, they walk according to the rule that is given in the law. Not that they run as fast as they ought, nor that they reach their goals immediately, yet they still aim at these things, God supporting them and not imputing their sins to them. Thus, believers keep the law.

However, here he is referring to the ceremonial law (although on previous occasions, Paul has shown us that all the commandments of God can only bring about our condemnation if we do not have resort to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ). Yet here he is speaking about the ceremonies and shadows. Let us now consider his meaning here. He says that those who are circumcised do not keep the law. He means that whilst they have this sign as a standard, to make others think that they are Jews, in order to avoid hatred and persecution, they do not observe the whole law, for they still allow themselves freedom to despise all that ought to accompany circumcision. The person who is circumcised ought also to sacrifice, and abstain from eating meat that is forbidden in the law, keep the festivals that are appointed therein, observe the various washings and cleansings, and so on. But these people pay no attention to this. When they are alone in secret and not being watched, none of this

matters to them, and they have no scruples about showing contempt for the whole ceremonial law. Therefore, we can see that they were not circumcised out of zeal, but because they cared about what others think of them.

Now we must be clear that Paul is speaking here about those who insisted on the circumcision of others as a compulsory act. For on certain occasions, Paul had to be careful to conform to the ways of the Jews, and to forfeit the liberty that he otherwise rightfully enjoyed, so as not to give offence (Acts 16:3; 1 Cor. 8:9). But he always maintained that he was not under any obligation to do so. Thus, since Paul submitted of his own free will, he did not wish to place others in servitude, as indeed he protests, when he says that he would not wish to bind anyone. It is true that this is said in another context, in relation to marriage, but he is still setting out in general terms that he does not wish to cast a snare for the souls that were bought by the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus Paul conducted himself. Now he says here, 'Those who constrain you to be circumcised, in other words, who impose the law upon you, and who tell you that you must keep this ceremony or else commit a mortal sin, needlessly subjugate you.' To sum up, those who wanted to force Christians to submit to observing the ceremonies and shadows of the law of Moses are here accused of double-mindedness. They did not really do these things because God required them but because they wanted to please and gratify others, and thereby escape persecution.

Today, we need the same warning that the Galatians had to have in those days. If we consider the state and condition of our own age, we will easily recognise that this teaching is most necessary, and that the Spirit of God wants to reveal that which he knew would be important for us. For how many people do we find today who strongly and firmly uphold the ceremonies of the law, and see nothing wrong with this? Worse than this, they uphold follies and traditions which have been invented by men; and even abuses, errors and deceits which are more terrible and more foolish than anything else. All of these are insisted upon with extreme rigidity by those who want us to obey them.

When we set before these hypocrites the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and tell them that the light of the gospel is obscured by all such observances, or that we are becoming like the Jews (for truly, the Papists have borrowed so many things from the law that it is hard to distinguish between the Jews and those who call themselves Christians)—when we tell them these things, they still maintain that they must keep them to the very end because they have been observed since the beginning of time. If we go further and tell them that these are such follies that even pagans have never stooped to observe such awful or such ridiculous superstitions as they do today, they will reply: 'Oh, but we must keep the traditions of our Holy Mother Church.' They will rant and rave over this matter. But what are these hypocrites doing now, who have incited the rage of both princes and judges against those who faithfully preach the Word of God? Well, as soon as they are amongst their own, they simply mock at these traditions, but when they are engaged in a debate about them, they will say the very opposite to all that they preach and declare in the flesh. By this we can see that they have no zeal for God and no integrity; but they seek to eat their fill, and to feast luxuriously, and then to be at peace and to have all their comforts and pleasures.

We see, therefore, that there are so many people without a single ounce of the fear of God or reverence for his Word, who nevertheless pretend to be great zealots. They allure poor souls, only to strangle them in a manner of speaking; therefore we must pay all the more attention to what Paul declares here. In other words, when we understand that these people who shout and rage do not practise what they preach, let us be on our guard and find out what motivates those we permit to teach us. It is true that if a man does the reverse of what he says, we must not as a consequence allow the Word of God to lose its authority over us. It is not fair to dethrone God from his sovereign position of authority for the sake of one wicked man. If a person leads a dissolute life, or commits a cowardly act, and yet has preached faithfully, we must not allow this to detract from the heavenly doctrine itself. We must not permit the truth of God to diminish in our eyes because a man, fickle by nature,

alters and wavers, or if he is a hypocrite and his life does not match that which his mouth proclaims. I tell you right now that whenever we see those who seem champions of the truth, giving themselves permission to do anything and licence to do the opposite of all that they preach, we must consider the situation, and, using our good judgment, refuse to be deceived by false appearances, or led by the nose. Let us search out their doctrine and make a good and thorough examination of it.

If we proceed in this way, we will see that the Papist's doctrine is nothing but a covering that they hide behind so that they can remain at peace in this world. They do not care how things appear to God, and they cannot face changing because they do not wish to expose themselves to the hatred of others. For they always live in fear of bringing trouble upon themselves or having further problems. When we see this, we know it to be an sure indication of the fact that we must guard against Satan's attacks, so that we will not be deceived, at least not inadvertently, as we have been saying.

Finally, Paul adds that these people want to glory in the flesh of simple-minded folk. This definitely relates to the sign of circumcision. It is as if he is saying, 'They want to leave their mark upon you, in order to prove that they have won you over.' How detestable this makes them, that they would abuse the sign that God gave to ratify the adoption of Abraham and his descendants, and corrupt its true and legitimate use. For God had commanded the Jews to be circumcised. Why? So that they would understand that the whole human race was cursed, there being nothing but pollution within us, and that therefore we must renounce all that pertains to our nature or else forever remain polluted and be condemned before God. This is what the Jews had to learn through circumcision. Yet they received testimony to the fact that their salvation would come through human seed, as indeed we know that we are blessed by God through the Lord Jesus Christ. This circumcision was designed to humble the Jews and cause them to be dissatisfied with themselves and ashamed when they saw that their nature was cursed. And yet it was also a testimony to the grace of God, enabling them to call upon him as their Father, knowing that through the seed promised to Abraham, they would receive salvation.

This, I say, is the true and legitimate use of circumcision. But what did these people that Paul speaks against do? They knew that circumcision no longer applied, and that since the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, baptism was sufficient. But because the Jews called all who were not circumcised apostates, these scoundrels retained the sign without the reality. We can see, therefore, that they were true forgers, turning this doctrine into something other than God intended when he instituted this spiritual sacrament, simply because they sought to satisfy the world.

The same is true today. Those who seek to overturn God's truth are much worse than Paul's adversaries, for there was some semblance of honesty in their pretext for maintaining circumcision and the figures of the law, in that these had been instituted and established by God. But what about these hypocrites who loudly proclaim that we must keep the ancient rites without the least alteration? Upon what do they base their views? They cannot claim that God is the author of all these things. Men have invented them according to their own fantasies, or, rather, Satan has whispered these things in their ears. In short, there is a confused labyrinth of teachings in the Papacy which they refer to as 'the service of God'. These are dreams put forward by men, and the devil is still their chief source of inspiration. Yet such scoundrels insist that we can take nothing away. What is their motive? They say that these are the means whereby we can obtain God's grace, and that they also inspire men to a greater level of devotion. Then again, they refer to all the foolish inventions that their own heads have devised as 'sacraments', saying, 'You must observe this because it is a sacrament'. When all is said and done, it is obvious that, above all else, they want to please men and preserve themselves. They are forced, in spite of themselves, to confess that all of this is neither here nor there as far as God is concerned, and their service does not please him in the least; he would disown it all, for he seeks to be served by obedience. However, we cause terrible confusion when we suggest removing these things, and when we speak clearly about such matters.

This, I say, is the way they disguise, corrupt and falsify religion and make it a confused mixture of just about everything. They may just say that we can remove the worst and most grievous errors, whilst leaving the ceremonies, which are still admissible. All those, I say, who speak in this way only seek a fair wind and a good profit in this world. This being the case, let us be warned by the Spirit of God to flee such plagues. Although we cannot enjoy victory in this world, and although we are criticised and shamefully accused, may we keep ourselves upright for the sake of the truth of God. May it be enough for us to enjoy the approval of our heavenly judge, even if the whole world regards us as an abomination. However much of this treatment we see, let us be patient, waiting for the day when the Lord Jesus reveals himself as our surety, and gives such victory to his truth that all his enemies stand in shame and silence before him.

Now let us fall down before the majesty of our great God, acknowledging our sins and praying that he would so touch us by his Holy Spirit with a true spirit of repentance, that we might tremble, despairing of ourselves, being emptied and stripped of all presumption. Furthermore, may it please him to increase in us the graces of his Holy Spirit so that we are no longer given over to our flesh and to this world, and hindered and held back by them. May we instead aim to serve him and make every effort to ensure that his name is glorified in us more and more, and that we bear visible evidence of our adoption, that we may be strengthened within ourselves. Thus others will have occasion to glorify the name of our great God, when he has worked in us. May he show this grace, not only to us, but also to all peoples and nations on earth, etc.