



A NEW CREATION

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Galatians 6:11-18
13th Message
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We have reached our final study in the book of Galatians. Paul has said almost everything he wants to say in this marvelous letter of freedom and grace. In these final verses he takes the pen into his own hand and writes a summary.

G. Walter Hansen comments on this practice:

Careful studies of thousands of letters written in Paul's day led to the discovery that most of the letters exhibit two styles, a refined style of a trained secretary in the body of the letter and a more casual style of the author at the conclusion. It appears that it was common practice for letters to be written by dictation to secretaries. The author would personally write only a few lines at the end of the letter. Usually these concluding lines in the author's own hand summarized the cardinal points of the letter. Evidently the author's summary of the main points served not only to verify that he had actually made those points in his dictation to his secretary, but also to underline the points he wanted his readers to remember. For this reason the conclusion of a letter provided important interpretive clues to the entire letter.¹

That is certainly the case here. Paul's custom was to dictate his letters to a scribe or personal friend; then he would take the pen and add a postscript. Usually he did this simply to protect against forgery. Sometimes he would add an exhortation. But on this occasion his postscript is much longer:

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. (Gal 6:11 NASB)

Some say he wrote with large letters because he had bad eyesight. In chapter 4 he said that the Galatians loved him so much that "you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me." But I am inclined to think that the major reason he wrote in large letters was to amplify what he wanted to say. That was a form of underlining in that day. If Paul were writing today, he would have changed the font or the point size. His purpose was, as one commentator put it, "to arrest the eye and rivet the mind."² Eugene Peterson put it this way in his paraphrase, "Now, in these last sentences, I want to emphasize in the bold scrawls of my personal handwriting the immense importance of what I have written to you."

Here Paul underlines to emphasize the important points he makes in the letter. In doing so he contrasts the main differences between the false Christianity

which the Judaizers had been proclaiming and the authentic Christianity which the Galatians heard originally from him.

Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised, that they may boast in your flesh. (6:12-13)

The first contrast which Paul highlights between false and authentic Christianity is that between external signs and internal realities. The essence of genuine Christianity is not outward but inward. Primarily it is not a religion of external symbols and ceremonies, but a reality that happens inwardly, spiritually, in the heart.

One obvious indicator of a false Christianity is a focus on external signs rather than internal realities. The bottom line for these Judaizers was that people had to be circumcised in order to be saved. But they were confusing the sign with the reality. Circumcision was a sign of relationship with God, a mark of ownership, a symbol that someone belonged to God. In the Old Testament it was a symbol of being placed into the community of God's people. Paul clearly explained earlier in the book that circumcision came after Abraham was justified by faith. Circumcision didn't result in his justification; it was merely an outward sign of that inward reality.

Today we still misinterpret symbols for the reality they represent. We get confused over baptism, which is the outward symbol of our being placed into Christ. In baptism we die with him and are raised again to newness of life. But it isn't the reality; baptism never saved anyone. We get confused over confirmation also. Churches can become confused as well. We focus on numbers and programs and the size of the building or budget. But these things cannot be equated with the work of God.

The sign of God's presence in a church is manifest in what God is doing inside us, in our dependence on him and the love we have for each other. When Barnabas was sent by the apostles to the church at Antioch, he commented that he perceived the grace of God there. That is what we should look for in a church, not the external signs of God's presence but the inward evidence of his dwelling there. Paul says of the church at Thessalonica, "We give thanks to God always for all of you,

making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father" (1 Thess 1:2-3). He witnessed their dependence on God and the love that they had for one another. These are the things that ought to mark a church, not external factors.

We need to focus on depending on God and on allowing his grace to work in our lives so that we are becoming more and more like him, slowly manifesting more of his character: becoming more gracious and kind, more understanding, mellower, and more confident of his love and providence in our lives. Preoccupation with externals takes all the focus off what God is doing. Paul reminds the Galatians that they can't become good by trying harder. That is counter-productive; it only makes them more ungodly. Those who are compelling you to be circumcised don't keep the law themselves, says Paul. Legalism produces hypocrisy. Because we have to look good on the outside we can't be honest and admit what is really going on in our marriages. We can't admit that we make mistakes. We can't look bad, because that would be unspiritual. But we don't have to be that way.

The church ought to be a place where we can talk freely and openly about the areas where we are struggling and the mistakes we have made. We don't have to prove anything. We don't have to look good. Our acceptance isn't based on our performance. What matters is what God is doing inside us, and every one of us is in process.

Whenever there is a focus on externals rather than internals there will always be pressure to conform. Paul says, "Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised." That is always a mark of the legalists. They push, they coerce, they twist arms, always demanding and insisting. You never feel you have done enough. In fact, you feel guilty if you don't feel guilty. I know, because I lived like a legalist for a long time. I used to think that motivation by guilt was my spiritual gift!

But authentic Christianity cannot be measured by externals. It is concerned with internals—and those can't be produced on command. You can't make fruit "happen." In fact, with authentic Christianity there is no need for that outer compulsion, because we now have an inner compulsion: the Spirit of God living inside of us. There is no need for an external push, because we have the Spirit who inwardly pulls. The more we spend time with Jesus, the more we are wonderfully attracted to godliness. The more we look into his loving eyes, the more we want. Then the compulsion comes from within, not as a result of pressure from without. We desire to please him because he loves us so much. We no longer obey because we have to or somebody is making us; now we want to obey.

So the first contrast between authentic Christianity

and its false imitation is that between external signs and internal realities.

A second contrast is found in verses 14-15. We will take verse 13 also, because it is closely related:

For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised, that they may boast in your flesh. But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. (6:13-15)

Paul contrasts human achievement and divine enablement. Authentic Christianity is fundamentally not a matter of what we do for God but what he has done for us. But the Judaizers had begun to confuse these Galatians at this very point. In their focus on circumcision, the Judaizers actually believed that salvation depended on obedience to the law. And by insisting on that they were saying that the death of Christ was insufficient, that people still had to earn the favor and forgiveness of God by their own good works. Their religion was more human than divine.

But Paul has opposed that thinking, demonstrating the folly of it. They could not think that salvation was the reward for obeying the law, because he has already explained, and repeated here in verse 12, that if they wanted to go that route, then they would have to obey the whole law—and they knew they had failed to do that.

Rather than any boasting in human achievement, Paul will boast only in the cross because of what it had accomplished in his life. Before his conversion he was a legalist. He was utterly focused on externals and human achievement. But when he met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, that old life passed away. He died to that with all of its self-absorption and self-centeredness. In its place came Christ, and Christ alone.

Have you ever wondered why the world hates the cross? What is it about the cross that angers people and makes them ridicule and persecute those who proclaim it? It is because the cross is the symbol of our failure. The cross says that we are terribly sinful and that we ought to be ashamed. Our condition is so terrible that it required the life of God. The cross says that we are utterly helpless and we cannot save ourselves. God himself had to come and save us.

There is a lot of controversy now concerning whether Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* will stir anti-Semitic views, because of the movie's portrayal of Jewish culpability in Jesus' death. But we are all culpable! As John Stott says, "Every time we look at the cross, Christ seems to say to us, 'I am here because of you. It is your sin I am bearing, your curse I am suffering, your debt that I am paying, your death I am dying.'"³

Nothing humbles us like the cross. Our views of our-

selves are puffed up and inflated, but when we travel to the place called Calvary, then we all shrink to the same size. That is why the world hates the cross. They find the idea of an atonement, that someone had to die for our sin, repulsive. You can talk about truth and justice, mercy, goodness and morality, even about Jesus Christ, but mention the cross and people get uncomfortable and sometimes downright angry. They don't want to hear that, because the message of the cross reveals the ugliness of our lives. That is why people try to avoid it: they do not want to bear that shame. But Paul says, "I will willingly do so. I boast in the cross." He would even dare to say to the proud intellectuals who lived in Corinth, "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). Paul was not intimidated by their vocabulary; he just kept preaching the cross.

Christianity is not about human achievement, it's about what God did and continues to do. Verse 15 may be the most succinct summary of the entire book, "For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." Salvation is not outward, but inward. It's not what we do but what God does. Authentic Christianity is supernatural. Externals don't matter. It's not a question of whether you are circumcised, baptized, galvanized or pasteurized! What matters is what God is doing inside you.

In the beginning, when the earth was formless and void, shapeless and empty, God spoke into that darkness and said, "Let there be light." And there was light. He began to make order out of that chaos. He made something out of nothing. That is what he is doing with you and me. He enters the dark and chaotic mess that we have made out of our lives and says, "Let there be light." That is what happened at our conversion. God comes to dwell inside us through the person of the Holy Spirit, and at that point everything becomes new.

As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." We have a *new purity* that makes us clean in God's sight even when we roll in the mud. We have a *new identity*. We are now his beloved children, no longer slaves to the law. No other labels will ever be able to stick. We have a *new desire* emerging that actually prefers holiness to sin. And we have a *new power* that allows us to draw near to God as forgiven heirs who long to behold the Lord's beauty. One of these days he will take us home and we are going to be everything we ever wanted to be. Meanwhile, he sees us right now as he sees his Son.

That is the heart of the gospel. Authentic Christianity is inward and spiritual. It is a divine work of grace.

So Paul concludes:

And those who will walk by this rule, peace and

mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen. (6:16-18)

The rule that Paul is referring to is the centrality of the cross and the "new creation" of verse 15. "Rule" is the word from which we get our word canon—not the thing that shoots projectiles, but a standard, a rule of thumb, a measuring stick. The standard by which we now measure everything is the rule of the new creation: not relying on what we do, but on what God is doing inside us. It isn't our efforts; it is God's work.

When you walk by this rule you enjoy two things: "peace and mercy." Peace: you can quit obsessing over your past, all the what ifs and might have beens. You can stop worrying about the future. You can stop being preoccupied with your own sin and dwelling on your own guilt. When you understand grace, then you can relax. You don't have to be uptight and always trying harder. If you understand this rule, and are walking by it, then you have peace.

And secondly, you have mercy. Mercy is God's gift to the helpless. Grace is God's gift to the unworthy. Mercy deals with the results of sin: pain, misery, and distress; while grace deals with the sin and guilt. The one extends relief, the other pardon; the one cures, heals and helps, the other cleanses and reinstates. In the Peanuts cartoon, Charley Brown needs mercy; Lucy needs grace. Like Charley Brown, we are helpless. We can't do anything for ourselves. We have tried hard to change, to erase memories of the past, to undo the wrong that we have done, but can't. We are utterly helpless. People say that "heaven helps those who help themselves," but that isn't true. As a matter of fact, the Bible says the opposite. Heaven helps those who are helpless. God loves us despite our failings and flaws. He gives help to the helpless.

We have reached the end of Galatians, but I hope the message of this book will linger with us for a long time. I pray you understand more deeply than ever how much God loves you. He will always love you. He will never leave you or forsake you. So Paul concludes the letter the way he began it, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen."

1. G. Walter Hansen, *Galatians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 197.

2. J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Oliphants, 1957), 65.

3. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1968), 179.

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