

Dr. Tim Gombis, Galatians, Session 8, Galatians 6:1-18

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This is Dr. Tim Gombis in his teaching on the book of Galatians. This is session 8, Galatians 6:1-18.

Well, this is Galatians 6. This is the final lecture on Galatians.

We're coming to the end of the letter, where Paul makes some closing exhortations after all of his theological argumentation, personal exhortations, interweaving of theological argumentation, and personal exhortations. But we're coming here to the close, where Paul turns again to his audience, saying, Brothers, even if any person is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such one in the spirit of gentleness, each looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. So once again, even exhortations like this, we're reading in terms of the rhetorical situation going on between Paul as an apostle, trying to correct the situation that is up and running there in Galatia.

So, this is having that in view. Now, because this is sort of so practically oriented, it's easy to apply this to any situation. If we do apply this to any situation, that's a good thing.

But read this verse in its original communicative situation. Paul is appealing to you who are spiritual. This is not the sort of a distinction that we might assume between everyday Christians and then super spiritual elites.

This is anybody who inhabits this realm of the spirit, anybody who's in that realm, jump into that situation and restore that kind of person, being careful lest you also be tempted. So, anybody who's in the spirit is the object of that exhortation. If you think about the trespass here, what Paul first has in mind is the person who needs to be restored.

The first thing that we should be thinking of is anybody, thinking about that previous diagram, anybody who's caught in the teaching that they need to be sort of drawn back to that exclusive group and not be fellowshiping with the wider range, that multi-ethnic, multi-national people, which would put them alongside of people formerly regarded as sinners. So, really, Paul is thinking in terms of anybody who's caught in the teaching. You who are of the spirit, restore that person, again, not targeting them or going after them or backing them into a corner, but restoring such a person in a spirit of gentleness, watching out so that you may not be tempted.

The temptation here, I don't think, is a temptation to be likewise drawn back into the teaching, but the temptation is to meet somebody that you might think of as opposition, to be tempted to engage with anger or to be tempted to engage by some kind of force or coercion. Again, Paul sees all of those behaviors, force, coercion, domination, and condemnation, as postures towards other people that will only bear bad fruit. This is sort of a Pauline rule.

You cannot create new creation results with the present evil age means. That's the temptation, which is to actually drive people over into new creation behaviors by condemning them or by cajoling them or coercing them. But Paul has in mind gentle appeal, gentle appeal.

By the way, don't mistake gentle appeal for a lack of strength. You can be absolutely committed to gentleness and restoration and cross-shaped existence and inclusivity in the body of Christ, appropriate inclusivity, and have courage, a courageous boldness that that is non-negotiable, that that reality is non-negotiable. And if it's the case that anybody is going to be a corrupting element there, people who are in leadership of a church need to courageously, sweetly, gently, but persistently demand that all those that join that reality do so on the basis of the cross, without excluding others, without behaving in a way that is inappropriate in terms of what's proper Christian identity.

So, just because we're in the shape of the cross doesn't mean that we don't have any sort of new creation spine. But what backs us up is the fact that we also are claimed by the exalted Christ. It's not that what backs us up is that, at some point, we're going to lose our temper.

That's not strength. That's a loss of faith in the realities of the new creation. So Paul calls upon the people in Galatia to restore such a person without being drawn into conflict, without being drawn into any kind of retaliatory mode.

In verse 2, he continues in this vein, exhorting them to bear each other's burdens. That is to say, be patient with one another, put yourself in service to one another, and in that way fulfill the law of Christ. Now, this term, the law of Christ, is not a separate law over against the Mosaic law.

It's not that Mosaic law no longer has any claim on the believer, but we're under the law of Christ. Paul is still talking about the Torah. The law, however, is read through the lens of Christ.

So, the law remains scripture for the Galatian Gentile Christians. It's just that they are related to the law insofar as they're claimed by Christ, and they regard it as scripture, consulting it to get to know the character of God. But they are not related to the law the way that Jews are related to the law.

For them, it is their national charter. It determines their diet, their calendar, and their holistic mode of life. The missionaries from Jerusalem, of course, are telling the Gentile Christians that the Mosaic law has to be the national charter for them as well, but that is the Mosaic law wrongly interpreted and wrongly regarded.

They are related to the law as it is scripture, the law as the place where they encounter the one true God that also is the revelation of the character of Christ as it happens. Continuing on here with Paul's exhortations in verses 4 to 4 and 5, Paul seems to say something slightly contrary in verse 5 to what he says in verse 2. He says in verse 2, bear one another's burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ. But in verse 5, he says that each one shall bear his own load.

Well, what exactly is going on there? In verse 4, Paul lets his audience know that they each need to be examining their own work. That is, each person needs to be very careful and self-examining to think about how they are participating in community life to see to it that they are participating fruitfully in community. Only then will they sort of have confidence that when the day of Christ is reached, they will know, or I should say then it will be revealed, that they actually genuinely are part of the new creation people.

This is what he means in verse 5, that each one shall bear his own load. Each person in the community is going to face the eschatological day and will face an evaluation as far as whether they are genuinely part of the new creation or whether they are a constituent part of the present evil age. Because of that, every person in the Galatian community needs to constantly self-examine to make sure that their behavior is characterized by the fruit of the Spirit and not by the works of the flesh.

So that's how you kind of reconcile those two seemingly contradictory statements that the Galatians need to bear one another's burdens, at the same time, each one will bear his own load. The behaviors they should embark on are self-giving love and looking out for each other, with the knowledge they are going to face judgment in the end. Verse 7 backs up a lot of these exhortations when Paul says, Do not be deceived.

God is not mocked. All of this is sovereignly overseen by God. He sees everything that's happening in the Galatian community.

God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. Everyone in the Galatian community will receive an eschatological reward or judgment based on their behavior in community.

So, he goes on to say there in verse 8, For the one who sows to his own flesh shall reap from the flesh corruption. The one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit

reap eternal life. So, a person sowing behaviors, investing in this realm, is going to reap the rewards of that.

A person sowing to the Spirit, investing in the community, and giving themselves towards corporate community flourishing; they're going to receive the reward of that which is the kingdom of God. God is sovereignly overseeing that. This kind of talk is a little bit unsettling, I think, especially for once-saved-always-saved kind of folks who just think about salvation completely from the past event of my conversion.

Christians need to be reminded that if I ever start in a Christian journey, praise the Lord, but the important day for Paul and for the New Testament writers and for really all the traveling missionaries and acts, the important day for them is the end, the final day. If I've ever made a start, that's great, but what matters is continuing and finishing. So based on that reality, Paul says this, basically, wherever you sort of knit your life to individually, but wherever a community sort of gives itself to, they're going to share that end.

That's just the Pauline reality. And as I said, because some Christian groups have kind of camped on one part of the salvific picture, that is, the moment of conversion, and built a theology of salvation from there, they've missed other aspects of the salvific picture, the necessity to persevere and the fact that there will be a judgment that will evaluate where our lives were invested, where our communities were invested. So, God is not mocked, and that's a message to communities to see to it that they're passing judgment in an ongoing basis as far as what constitutes their community life.

Is it new creation-oriented? Is it present evil age-oriented? And if it is one or the other, what needs to change or what needs to be maintained? Notice that we get one of these notes in verse 11, which we get in one or two others of Paul's letters, where he indicates that he actually does not write this letter. Paul's letters were almost certainly dictated, but he says in verse 11 of chapter 6 in one of the closing notes, see with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. So he likely dictated this letter to someone else.

Most often, we get an indication of who actually wrote the letter at the end of the letter. That is, who was the amanuensis or the secretary that took down Paul's dictation? We don't know who that was, but we often get a note at the end of these letters where Paul will sign it, or he'll write his own message.

And it is obvious that he writes this because he's not a regular writer. This is a little bit unusual for people in the modern world to recognize, but in the ancient world, literacy rates are extremely low. It was not necessary for everyone to read, and so if you could read and write, you were known.

If you could write, you were called a scribe. Obviously, some people could write down some things, and Paul could write his name in a sentence or so, but he just sort of indicates here that he makes a final note. It's kind of fun to look at the closings of other Pauline letters and see who actually wrote those.

If you ever want to have a Bible quiz with a bunch of people, one of the funnest ones is to ask who wrote Romans. And that's pretty obvious because in Romans 16, Tertius says explicitly, I Tertius wrote this letter, indicating that he's the one that took down the dictation. Sadly, we don't know who took down this letter, and I say it's kind of sad because, however, whoever it was put to the test as much as the Galatian audience was.

It must have been that Paul was so fired up that he was going at such speed that the person couldn't necessarily take down full sentences. We have grammatical breaks. It's just a mess, this letter, indicating the fired-up state that Paul was in.

Anyway, we get a little window into early first-century letter constructions. In verse 12, Paul indicates again the subversive motives of the agitators, where he says, basically, these missionaries want to look good for their colleagues back in Jerusalem. When he says, 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, which would happen for their fellow Jews if they were indeed working with me to be building this one new multi-ethnic people of God.

But these Jewish missionaries want to boast in your flesh, kind of using flesh there in a sort of multivalent way, or at least an ambiguous way, meaning both their circumcision, you know, foreskins, but also sort of in how they've constructed a new identity for them based on this fleshly mode of evaluating identity. So they want to go back to Jerusalem and be able to say that we have just converted this formerly pagan community, even after Paul was there, we've converted them into being a properly Jewish community. But of course, that would be a boast, that would be a boast in the old age, that would be a present evil age kind of a boast in Paul's imagination.

Interesting note here in verse 13, where Paul says that those who are circumcised do not even keep the law themselves, because on Paul's conception of things, and this resonates with Romans 2, there's a difference between being a hearer of the law, that is somebody who is merely somebody who has Jewish identity, and being a keeper of the law. And Paul is indicating here that these people who claim to be of the law are actually not keeping the law. In Paul's mind, you can be a lawkeeper and not be of the law.

That is to say, if you are a non-Jewish, obedient to God person, that's observing the law, that's being an obedient person. But you can also be somebody who is of the

law, a hearer of the law, someone who is of the works of the law, and be disobeying the law, which he categorizes these people there in verse 13. Those who are circumcised are of the circumcision, but they're actually not law keepers because they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in their flesh, which Paul regards as a lack of law keeping.

Paul, on the other hand, has a radically different boast, and this is back to this notion of cruciformity, which is a pregnant notion applicable to so many areas of life. Paul's boast is radically alternative, especially if you think in terms of Paul's previous boast, which you get a window into in Philippians 3—boasting in his Pharisaic identity, boasting in his Jewish identity, boasting in his achievements, boasting in his zeal for God, which drove him to persecute the church. For Paul, that's who he formerly was.

Now, he has a totally different boast. But may it never be that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, and this is powerful because of what the cross has done to him, through which, through the cross, the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. So, Paul will continue to boast in the cross, which is that symbol of absolute shame.

It is the symbol of imperial capital punishment. It's the symbol of loss. It's the symbol of weakness.

It's the symbol of being dominated. It's the symbol of being condemned. It's the symbol of being cursed by God, and Paul embraces all of that because that was the device through which the new creation was created, and that is the means by which Paul is brought out of this old world into the new world.

And so Paul will gladly trumpet it because it has set him free, and it has liberated him into experiencing the power of Christ's resurrection. It has knit him together with his fellow believers in Christ, and it has brought him into a life-giving reality, which sets him on a trajectory toward ultimate resurrection and ultimate participation in the new creation when the fullness of the kingdom of God comes. Formerly, all his former boasts only guaranteed him condemnation in the end.

They were only guaranteeing him destruction, and they were only guaranteeing him being cut off from the present experience of resurrection life. So, the cross is the ultimate promising reality, even though to the eyes of the flesh, it just symbolizes pain, discomfort, shame, weakness, humiliation, etc. But this is the paradox of the cross, and this is the paradox and the wonder of Pauline theology.

The closer to the cross I am, the closer to resurrection power I am. The more I try to ward myself off from pain and humiliation and suffering, the more unlikely I am to actually experience the power of Christ's resurrection. That is why, for Paul, the cross

is his boast, and that is the means of him being crucified to the old world and being alive to the new world.

So, for circumcision, neither is circumcision anything nor uncircumcision but a new creation. Again, that's back to Paul's sort of fundamental conviction that orients his life to the new creation. All these old distinctions have gone.

Gender, ethnicity, all that is gone. That does not determine our value anymore. Now, we are set free to truly enjoy who we are in this new context of resurrection life.

What's interesting about this is that is not simply a closing nicety. We see that stated in 5:16. Sorry, 5:6. For we, through the Spirit by faith, are waiting for the... I'm sorry. I'm getting this wrong.

Oh, sorry. It is 5:6. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything but faith working through love, which is repeated there in 6:15. For neither is circumcision anything or uncircumcision anything but a new creation. What's interesting is what Paul says in the following verse: for those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them.

So, he calls that a canon, a rule, canon. This is the rule. This is sort of this... You want to talk about the new law.

This new law is this. Your ethnic identity, this whole old world, no longer matters. What matters is participation in new creation.

What matters is faith working itself out in love. That's the rule. Again, this is why, when it comes to pastoral ministry, we need to be absolutely insistent that everybody in our fellowships is participating fully and fruitfully through lives of self-sacrificial love, self-giving, and service.

And where there are attitudes of division, where there are attitudes of factionalism or dissensions or breaking up into subgroups in our churches in ways that foster dissatisfaction, lack of contentment, those are not just unfortunate developments in a church. Those are fatal developments. Those are fatal threats to new creation life.

Again, we typically rank sins according to sort of what are the most radioactive, and that set off alarm bells. Those are the ones where we'll initiate church discipline, but I think that shows a lack of understanding of the primacy of the church and the cruciality of unity. That's the rule.

New creation, faith working itself out in love. And finally, this note where Paul says, peace and mercy be upon those people, but also upon the Israel of God. And this statement has brought about no end of debate, especially people who try to relate

who are the Old Testament people of God to who are the New Testament people of God.

Once we get back into the sort of getaway from all these theological debates with regard to all of that, I think it's pretty clear that Paul is actually talking about the Israel of God. Paul would not use that term of just sort of Gentiles. He's not talking about the church now playing this role of Israel.

I think there's no way of getting around the fact that he's talking about the Jerusalem church. He's talking about Jewish Christians who really have embraced their role in the people of God as set alongside other Christians who are non-Jewish. Those people are called the Israel of God.

Gentiles who are in the faith are Christians, Turkish Christians, Syrian Christians, Roman Christians, or Egyptian Christians. But to be a Jewish Christian is to be part of God's historic people, but God's historic people are actually claimed by God and those who claim Christ. Here are a few final closing notes of Galatians.

Paul prays from now on, let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear the brand marks of Jesus on my body. They know this. They know this because when he was there, he was a public demonstration of the death of Christ.

You know, they know that he bears the brand marks of Christ on his body. It's kind of a funny ending to this letter. Just like it began abruptly, it just kind of closes abruptly.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is with your spirit, brothers. Amen. There's no mention of who wrote the letter.

There's no commendation of who is carrying it, which is different from Ephesians and Colossians. There are no closing greetings like in Philemon, even has several verses of closing greetings. Romans 16 is a chapter of closing greetings.

So there's a sense in which this letter was written from an apostle who is very upset, very disturbed that several of his churches where he has seen new creation life be birthed is being drawn back by the dynamics and dimensions of the present evil age and facing possible destruction, which would be an absolute tragedy. Well, here are some final lessons from Paul's letter to the Galatians for Christian identity and for Pauline theology. First of all, as many people are now recognizing, and I'm fully in agreement with this, with regard to Paul and Judaism, Paul is Jewish, thoroughly Jewish, makes no apology for being Jewish, and with regard to his theology, has no problem with Judaism.

In fact, I think in Galatians 1, his mention of Judaism has to do with that sort of Maccabean Judaism that is a subgroup within the Jewish people who are pursuing

the purity of the Jewish people. He really has no view of Judaism, which we can detect in his letters. In Paul's view, there are two groups of people.

There are people who are obedient to God, whether they are Gentile or Jewish, and people who are disobedient. That's his distinction. There are people who are among God's new creation people, Jew or Gentile, and people who are outside that he wants to see brought into God's new creation people.

When it comes to keeping the law for Paul because he doesn't see a distinction necessarily between the Old Testament and the New Testament, Paul wasn't aware that there was going to be a New Testament. For him, the Bible was just the Old Testament. Keeping the law, quote-unquote, simply has to do with obeying God, doing what scripture says.

Keeping the law for Jews is to remain Jewish and to observe what it looked like to be faithful to be among the people of Israel. Keeping the law for a Gentile Christian meant being obedient to Christ, being obedient to Jesus, exercising faith in Jesus, participating fruitfully among the new creation people of God, and getting to know the God of Israel, but not adopting the Israelitish-specific components of the Mosaic law. I know that that's complicated, but to relate to the God of Israel, there's no other way to get to know him than in the scriptures of Israel.

So those are the scriptures for the church, but they don't play the role of sort of a national charter the way that they do for Jews. That distinction has to be kept in mind. But you could still be a law observer as a non-Jew, whereas even in Paul's mind, some Jews would be non-law observant because they're not doing what the law says, even if in their mind they think that they are.

When it comes to thinking about contemporary application, I think that we have to be very cognizant in any culture where you're reading Galatians, any culture. For me, I'm an American Christian, and I think it's incumbent upon the American church to recognize all of the tribalisms that affect our culture, political, denominational, and regional. Are you from the east or the west? Are you from the north or the south? Are you Republican or Democratic, conservative or liberal? Whatever kind of school of thought or denominational affiliation or political party affiliation you're part of, I think it's crucial to recognize these distinctions in our culture, to recognize how they're setting people against each other, and even if we have loyalties or affinities, we have to make sure that as American Christians, we are not letting these things be the sites of animosity or conflict.

I need to be sure that even as an American, this is not something that I hold as my fundamental identity over against people from other nations. I'm a Christian. I'm part of a radically new people where I belong to other Christians more intimately and

intensely than I do belong to other Americans, even though I can enjoy the best parts of being American, which I do.

I enjoy the calendar. I love our sports. I love so much of what it means to be American because I feel like it's possible to be American drawn into God's people, but I need to also recognize how complicated that actually is.

How do I focus on my fundamental identity as a person drawn into the family of God in Christ and let my other identities play less of a role in how I associate with other people, how I see the world, and how I see other people? That's always going to be a complicated reality, but like Paul, I have my identity in the cross. My church has its identity in the cross, and that's something that has shaped me far more than anything else. And finally, I would just commend you on the fruitfulness of Paul's apocalyptic vision.

That is, how Paul sees the church situated between the crossover of the ages at the place of cosmic realm conflict and how it is that I can analyze personal attitudes and behaviors. I can think about my posture with regard to other people. I can analyze relationships and community dynamics as they're being affected by the flesh.

I can analyze community dynamics as far as how God wants to bless communities and shape communities according to resurrection life, which is always going to be oriented by the cross. This has become for me a lens to think through Pauline theology, but it's also become a lens for me to think about pastoral situations, to think about relationships, and I know it's been fruitful for so many others. Well, I hope that this study of Galatians has been life-giving for you.

I just encourage you to read it, read it carefully, read it thoroughly, and enjoy it. I hope that it becomes a source of God's life-giving power for you.

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