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The Letter to the Galatians—Fall 2013 Shared Ministry Study
Session 6 (Galatians 6:1-18)—October 1, 2013



Galatians 6 Overview: How To Live Together

If Paul's understanding is right, God has a habit of doing things the hard way. It is hard enough getting a group of *like-minded* people from the *same* background and culture together into a community. But how much harder is it to create a new kind of community, one that somehow has even *tighter* ties than blood, and to do it with people divided by differences from their religious, ethnic, and cultural past? And yet that is exactly the project that God has taken on in the church of Jesus Christ, according to Paul's Gospel. God is determined to make a new creation out of Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women, and insiders and outsiders. That is harder than just insisting everyone has to be the same in order to get in the club!

You have to admit that the Judaizer teachers who have come to Galatia are offering an easier (well, in a sense) approach to being a community—everyone will just be all the same. All will have to keep kosher; all males will have to be circumcised. All will have to live by the same religious rules, and thus they will have enforced uniformity. Less to fight about when everyone is the same, right?

But for Paul, the diversity of Jew and Gentile is part of the proof that God is not just making a new *club* by creating the church, but is actually establishing a whole new *creation*. So it's hard work to live together, sure. But it is worth it—because we are the new community united by the cross of Christ. What Paul does in this chapter is to give direction for practical action toward that goal. How can people from such different backgrounds really live together in a *community*? It begins with a willingness to bear each other's burdens and at the same time for people to focus on getting their *own* act together rather than judging others. These ideas are repeated across others of Paul's letters, too, but here especially in Galatians you can feel in the background the tension between these Jewish Christians, Gentile-convert Christians, and the two different sets of teachers (Paul and the Judaizers). As we look at the rest of the sixth chapter of Galatians, keep in mind that Paul is trying to advise people who are living out the implications of the Gospel together. This is a snapshot of how to live together even when we don't bring any other common ground to the table but Christ.

- In the 21st century, we are no longer fighting over the question of circumcision for Gentiles—but we do still deal with the tensions of living together as a *family* of God with new issues and challenges. What do you see as the biggest challenges to our living together as a community as Christians in 2013?
- Is it harder or easier to have a community made up of people from diverse viewpoints, cultures, ethnic, and religious histories? What special needs would arise from this kind of group?
- Paul sees the issue of Christian community as a vital matter, because it flows out of his gospel message that God has welcomed 'outsider' Gentiles into the body of Christ *as Gentiles*, rather than insisting on uniformity in that area. How does our way of life together become a witness (for good or for bad) in our day and age?

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Galatians 6:1-5—Carrying Each Other

Let's start with some realism: just because the gospel announces that we are all one in Christ, it doesn't mean we can't or won't still fight with each other or struggle with life. We will keep sinning. We will keep falling. We will keep stumbling. Paul is honest that way, rather than imagining that just because we are baptized we have all become perfect. We haven't. We won't, at least not this side of glory. So Paul offers the only kind of direction he can: practical advice for living with people who will mess up sometimes. You could summarize it this way:

- We are in this together. We don't walk away from the table when we don't get our way.
- We don't walk on eggshells. We don't ignore it when others mess up—because we are all “right” with God as a gift of grace through faith in what *Christ* has done, we can have the courage to say the difficult but needed words of correction.
- We carry each other, and each other's burdens, because we really are a family, adopted by God as children and made to belong to one another.
- We don't puff ourselves up to make ourselves feel bigger or more important than someone else.
- We worry about getting our *own* act together first, rather than starting to fix *someone else*, or making someone else the identified “problem.”

Notice how flexible and patient Paul's vision for life together seems to be here. He could be a hard-liner on other things (like whether we can add *anything* else to the Gospel), but here Paul envisions a community with a lot of tolerance, endurance, and forgiveness. That comes out of his theology, but it is also imminently practical—we are bound to one another, so leaving the family to ignore our problems or disagreements is not an option. If that's the case, we have to find ways to live *together* as God's people, rather than walking away or going on witch hunts at every possible disagreement.

Consider this insight of Robert Farrar Capon's (a writer we started this series with back in Chapter 1):

“Forgiveness, therefore, is not a psychological matter, or a religious matter, or a ‘spiritual’ matter: it is a political matter—it's the centerpiece of the politics of the New Order. Politics is the art of the possible. And the only thing we can possibly do with the impossible natures we foist on each other to drop dead to the business of proving we're perfect peaches and hand out pardon all around.” (From The Mystery of Christ...and Why We Don't Get It)

- What do you think Paul means when he talks about “restoring” someone who has been caught in some kind of transgression? What makes it possible for Christians to tell difficult truths to each other, or to correct each other?
- What does it mean to “bear one another's burdens,” and how does it fit with verse 5's statement that “all must carry their own loads”?

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Galatians 6:6-10—Keep on Keeping On

This is one of those “but on the other hand...” moments. As much as we are supposed to bear each other’s burdens and even to gently correct and restore one another when someone goes astray, Paul also tells us to focus on doing our best *ourselves* rather than fussing about what other people are doing. Rather than worrying about someone *else* is doing what they are supposed to be doing, Paul just advises the Galatians to live and work and spend their energy on the things they will be proud to have spend them on when they get to glory. Waste your time on trivial things in this life, and you will come to see how much of a waste it has been in the end. Use your time on the things that last (the Kingdom!), and you won’t be disappointed, because it will last.

Notice how, in these verses, Paul talks about why it still matters for us to work hard and dedicate our lives to doing good for “all, and especially for those in the family of faith,” even though he has spent the whole letter arguing *against* the belief that our works put us in a right relationship with God. For Paul, grace does not mean being free from doing good for others, but rather than we are freed from worrying over doing enough good deeds so that we can actually get around to *doing* good for others without

- Why *do* we commit to working hard and serving others if we don’t earn our status with God by our good works?
- This whole “you sow what you reap” train of thought in v. 7-9—is it the same as “karma”? Is it just saying, “Do good and good things will happen to you?” Or is there something different going on here?
- How widely should we be aiming our good actions? Should Christians only look out for other Christians, or for others as well? What difference does that make?

Galatians 6:11-18—Finishing with Grace

The endings of Paul’s letters can be final words of wisdom, greetings to individuals, personal comments, or a number of other things. Here in Galatians we get an odd personal detail about Paul signing the letter with his own hand to write the final greetings, right up against a final appeal not to fall for the counterfeit gospel of the circumcision party. And then it culminates in the cross—it’s always been all about the cross of Christ for Paul, which brings together Jew and Gentile in a new creation, and for which Paul has suffered and still wears the scars (v. 17) to prove it. Finally, Paul ends with a blessing, as he almost always does. But notice how appropriate the last words are—this is a prayer for God’s *grace* to enfold them.

- What do you think Paul means about carrying “the marks of Jesus”? How does that tie back in with the themes of this whole letter?
- What does Paul mean when he calls the church part of a “new creation”? What about “the Israel of God”?