



II. Galatians 6

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Galatians 6:1-2

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.

Take care that you yourself are not tempted.

Bear one another's burdens [5:14],

and in this way you will fulfil the law of the Messiah.

The disturbance caused by those insisting on the law is resulting in the 'enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions and envy' which Paul has already castigated as being 'works of the flesh' (5:19-21). If the community is to heal, there is need for correction. Paul insists on this being done 'in a spirit of gentleness'. He makes his message very personal by moving here, for the only time in this letter, to the second person singular. He is inviting each person in the community to take care.

Correcting others is necessarily a delicate task. It can be carried out effectively only where there is love. It is interesting to compare Paul's advice with that found in the Gospel of Matthew (18:15-20), especially since this Gospel probably emerged from the Christian community at Antioch, which was Paul's community for a number of years.

Before speaking of correction, Matthew reminds us of the need for humility (18:1-5), of the importance of not scandalising or despising others (18:6-9), and of God's love for those who have gone astray (18:10-14). If a member of the Christian community goes astray, it is an act of mercy to attempt correction, but the correction will be graced and not destructive only to the extent that the virtues stressed in these passages are present. Matthew follows his teaching on correction by speaking of the importance of forgiveness (18:21-35).

The Galatians are obviously concerned about the continuance of sin among the baptised. What they need, insists Paul, is not the law but the guidance of Jesus' Spirit. Jesus will inspire them to correct each other, but always 'in a spirit of gentleness'.

It is likely that Paul's opponents, in their insistence on the need for the Gentile converts to follow the law, were doing so by speaking of it as the 'law of the Messiah'. Paul picks up the phrase, but directs it to the injunction given by Jesus concerning love. As he said earlier, quoting the law: The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (5:14; see Luke 10:27-28). The Christian law is Christ.

Once again, Paul shows that it is not the law that is the problem. It is insisting on observance of the law as a secure means of being in communion with God, or when observance of the law issues in behaviour that is not according to the Spirit of Jesus. Jesus obeyed the will of God perfectly. If they open their hearts to Jesus' Spirit they will share in his obedient faith. In their mutual love they will experience communion with God in the Spirit of Jesus: something which obedience to the law could not even imagine.

Galatians 6:3-5

³For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. ⁴All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbour's work, will become a cause for pride. ⁵For all must carry their own loads.

Part of the problem of the Galatians is that they have been comparing themselves with the missionaries who have been boasting of the law. No one should be boasting of being better than anyone else, and there is no need for the Galatians to feel inferior to those who claim to find help in living a moral life by clinging to the law. If anyone is going to boast, let it be about the gift of his Spirit given to them by the risen Jesus.

Galatians 6:6

Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.

Some think that in verse six Paul has in mind the giving of assistance to the poor in Jerusalem. James, Cephas and John asked him to help in this way when he was in Jerusalem, and this was something he was keen to do (see 2:9-10). No doubt he brought the matter up when he visited Galatia shortly after his visit to Jerusalem. He says as much in writing later to the community in Corinth: 'concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia' (1Corinthians 16:1).

Others suggest that the problem was that with the coming of the Judaeans missionaries the communities were neglecting the teachers that Paul had set up while he was with them.

Galatians 6:7-10

⁷Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. ⁸If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. ⁹So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. ¹⁰So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

It matters how we live. Our judgment depends upon it. We will live good moral lives to the extent that we are guided by Jesus' Spirit. The end result of following any way that is not inspired by the Spirit of Christ is 'corruption'. The goal to which life in the Spirit looks forward is 'eternal life'.

Galatians 6:11-12

¹¹See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!

¹²It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised – only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of the Messiah.

Paul has been dictating to a secretary skilled in the craft of writing. Now he sums up in his own handwriting. Those who are trying to get the Gentile Galatians to be circumcised are seeking to avoid the kind of persecution which Paul has suffered (see 5:11). They do not want to ‘be crucified with Christ’ (2:19). They do not want to die to a way of life that they have known in order to embrace Christ on the cross, or rather, to be embraced by him.

Galatians 6:13

¹³Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law,
but they want you to be circumcised
so that they may boast about your flesh.

They keep talking of the necessity of observance of the law. Surely, by now, the Galatians can see that in failing to live 'the law of the Messiah' (6:2), in failing to live according to the Spirit of him who brought the law to its perfection, in failing to transcend the law by attaching themselves whole-heartedly to Christ, they are failing to follow the way pointed out by the law itself. They are failing in their obedience to what God has revealed in his Son

Stephen made the same criticism of those who were stoning him: 'You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it' (Acts 7:53).

Galatians 6:14

May I never boast of anything
except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,
by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Paul does not want to have any other security to boast of than the security of knowing Jesus' love revealed on the cross. He has died to anything that is not Christ, and this includes basing his confidence on observance of the law. Those who crucified Jesus did so in the name of obedience to the law. Paul has been crucified with him (2:19).

Galatians 6:15

For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything;
but a new creation is everything!

Paul repeats the central theme of this letter and of his whole preaching. In Christ God has made a new creation. Man and woman are created anew, for God has breathed into our flesh of clay the life-giving Spirit of Christ his Son. In this way he has made us his children and heirs with Christ to the promise. God has offered us a new way which transcends the old law in that it enables us to live in such a way that we will inherit the kingdom of God. The life-giving Spirit of Jesus enables us to live Jesus' life and to experience his love-communion with God.

Galatians 6:16

¹⁶As for those who will follow this rule –
peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

How often Paul would have heard and prayed: ‘Peace upon Israel’ (Psalm 125:5). God’s promise to Abraham, the sacred scriptures and the law have been central to this whole letter, as they came to their perfection in Jesus. The same prayer comes readily to his lips here.

Galatians 6:16

¹⁶As for those who will follow this rule –
peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

Having prayed that God's peace and mercy may come upon the Galatians, his heart goes out as well to his own people, the Jews, and he prays that the fullness of God's blessing may come upon them and that they may respond by believing in Jesus and answering God's call into the Christian community. Paul's heart is big enough to hold both prayers. His missionary life, ever faithful to Judaism and its mission, demonstrates that for him the two prayers are intimately interwoven.

Galatians 6:17-18

- ¹⁷From now on, let no one make trouble for me;
for I bear the marks of Jesus branded on my body.
- ¹⁸May the grace of our Lord Jesus the Messiah
be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

Like a soldier showing the scars of battle as proof of the price he has paid for what he believes, Paul reminds them that he has suffered in the name of Christ . They have seen for themselves the scars of the suffering inflicted on him at Iconium, where ‘they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead’ (Acts 14:19). His boast is that he has accepted the death of everything that could separate him from Christ. He wants nothing less for them.

Some key texts

‘It was the will of our God and Father that Jesus give himself for us to set us free’ (1:4).

‘It is no longer I who live. It is the Messiah who lives in me. The life I now live, I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me’ (2:20).

‘There is no longer Jew or Greek. There is no longer slave or free. There is no longer male and female. All of you are one in the Messiah, Jesus’ (3:28).

‘God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying Abba (Father)’ (4:6).

‘For freedom, the Messiah has set us free’ (5:1).

‘The only thing that matters is faith working through love’ (5:6).

‘The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control’ (5:22).

‘Let us not grow weary in doing what is right’ (6:9).

Can you hear Paul saying to the Galatian Christians?

My need for communion with God took me to the law. I was committed to observing every last detail of it. Then, in his mercy, God revealed his Son to me. I realised that the answer to my need was communion with Christ. I was attracted to him, for I wanted to share his secret. I wanted to share his life. I wanted to be able to give my life in love the way I saw him giving his. The law did not make this possible. When he embraced me from the cross and poured his Spirit into my heart, my fascination with the law died. I fixed my eyes upon him. I saw that the purpose of the law has been achieved in the faith of Jesus. In giving me his Spirit, he gave me a share in his faith. Now I can live for God.

The love of the Father into which I have been invited, the embrace of the Son, the communion in the Spirit issuing from the pierced heart of my crucified Lord, has put to death in me the distracted desires that dominated my existence. The law of God has been written now in my heart, and with it the power to keep it. For I am a child of God, living already through his Spirit the life of his Son. May nothing separate me from this love. And may nothing separate you, my dear Galatians. Amen.



‘He gave himself for us
to set us free’ (Galatians 1:3)

‘If the Son makes you free you
are free indeed’ (John 8:36)

Shortly after writing to the Galatians Paul went with Barnabas to the Assembly in Jerusalem which decided that Gentiles could be welcomed into the community as Gentiles.

[Not used by Paul in his Letter to the Galatians]

Acts 15:24-29

Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from πορνεία. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

49AD Acts 15:39 – 16:3

Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.



Acts 16:4-10

As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily. They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.