

A NEW CREATION

Galatians 6:11-18

Key Verse: 6:15

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.

The epilogue of Paul's letter to Galatians is more than a few words of farewell. He summarizes the main points of his letter by contrasting circumcision (human effort) and a new creation (the work of God). There are two ways to live the Christian life. One is to focus on our outward appearances before people, ignoring our personal relationship with God. The other is to allow God to change us inwardly so that we may live by the Spirit, bearing the fruit of the Spirit. The choice is ours to make.

Look at verse 11. *See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!* St. Paul usually dictated his letters to his assistants, perhaps because of his eye problems (4:13-15). In the other epistles, he dictated the whole letter and then signed it at the end. But in Galatians, he did more than just authenticating it at the end. He wrote the entire concluding section, if not the whole letter, with his own hand in large letters. He wanted the believers to know that the letter came from his heart with God's inspiration (2Ti 3:16). It was not a routine form letter. It was his personal appeal to them. He was deeply concerned about the issues that the believers in Galatia were challenged with. How did Paul summarize the issues?



First, the motives of the false teachers (12-14). The problems of the Galatian Christians began when some Jewish Christians came from Jerusalem and told them that they needed more than their faith in Jesus in order to be saved. These false teachers said the Galatians needed to be circumcised, meaning they had to obey the law, in order to be justified. In this letter, Paul emphatically told the Galatians that this was a blatant false teaching: "... a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ" (2:15). Abraham, the father of faith, was declared righteous when he believed in God and his promise that he would send the Messiah, the Holy Seed, and all nations would be blessed through him. Based on the promise, even the Gentiles can be justified by faith in Jesus (3:8). Abraham's justification happened before anyone was circumcised or any law was introduced. The law was given to the Jews some 430 years later through Moses. The purpose of the law was not to save people from their sin and death. It was to help the sinful humanity to realize what terrible sins they committed so that they might come to God in repentance. The law can tell us if we are right with God, but it cannot make us right with God. It is like an MRI machine that can diagnose your disease but cannot cure it. The law cannot cure our sin-sickness. No, only Jesus can do that. Only Jesus can wash away our dirty sins and restore our broken relationship with God. Only Jesus died

on the cross as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. So we all are “sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (3:26).

So why did the Jewish legalists tell the Galatians to observe the law? What were the motives of those who insisted on circumcision? Earlier, Paul said that the Judaizers were throwing the Galatians into confusion and were trying to pervert the gospel of Christ (1:7). They were zealous to win them over, but for no good (4:17). What they wanted was to alienate the believers from those who preached the true gospel. This time, Paul points out a couple of more reasons why they tried to twist the gospel truth. Look at verses 12-13. *Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh.*

Paul says that the Judaizers wanted to make a good impression outwardly. They wanted to say to others, “I keep the law; you don’t. So I am better than you.” They felt good whenever they counted how many more laws they kept compared to other people. They were circumcised. They did not go into the house of those who were not circumcised. They did not eat with the uncircumcised people. They fasted twice a week. They didn’t touch any dead animals, and so on.

Another motive of the Judaizers was to avoid persecution because of the cross of Jesus. Today, people wear gold cross as a necklace and hang their cross on the dashboard as a good luck charm. But in the 1st century, the cross of Christ was a symbol of shame. Crucifixion was such inhumane way to execute a person that Rome prohibited crucifixion for its own citizens. In Rome, Christians were fed to hungry lions in Coliseum as the crowd cheered. The Judaizers wanted to avoid the persecution. There was another reason why the legalist despised the message of the cross. The message says that when you accept Jesus who died on the cross as the Lamb of God as your personal Savior and commit your life to him, you are saved. There is nothing for you to add to your salvation. There are no papers to sign, no fees to pay and no rules to keep. To the proud people, this was too simple. It took away their pride. They couldn’t say, “Hey, Jesus saved me, but I did my own part. I contributed 10% of my salvation.”

But Paul preached the message of the cross to the Jews and the Gentiles. He preached Christ crucified to the wise and the foolish. And he was persecuted for this. In many of the cities in Asia Minor he visited, he was beaten, put into prison and stoned to near-death by the hardcore Jewish zealots who were opposed to his preaching. But the Judaizers added circumcision to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. It was a compromise. Paul says in verse 13 that they did not even obey the law even as they compelled the Galatians to do so. This means that some of them did not have a conviction in circumcision. They adopted the practice because it made their life easier. The truth was that they could not obey the law fully. No one could obey the law 100%, 24/7. Even St. Paul, a Pharisee of the Pharisees, failed to do so. Yet they urged the Galatian believers to obey the law. It was hypocrisy. Of course, Paul is not saying here

that they should observe the law. He is saying keeping the law is neither necessary nor possible.

The Judaizers wanted to boast about their flesh. Their motive was not to win people to Christ. What about us today? In UBF, our constant prayer topics include raising up 12 disciples and sending out 100,000 missionaries. Many ministries pray for 120 1:1 Bible studies. This is biblical as Jesus told us to feed his sheep and make disciples (Jn 21:15; Mt 28:19). But it would be wrong if we use the numbers to brag about ourselves. We want more students to join our ministry, not because we want to boast about what we do, but because we want to help them to know Christ personally through our Bible studies with them and prayers for them. Let us constantly remind ourselves that it is not about us; it is about Jesus.

Second, never boast except in the cross of our Lord (14). The Judaizers wanted to boast about their flesh. But Paul said in verse 14. *May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.* Paul had much to boast about himself (Php 3:1-10). He was from the tribe of Benjamin, “a Hebrew of Hebrews,” meaning he had the Jewish blue blood. He was a rising Pharisee in Jerusalem, groomed under the prominent Pharisee named Gamaliel to be a future leader of the country. In today’s terms, he had a degree from Harvard and was on his way to become a senator and then a Supreme Court justice. Paul had worked hard to achieve the goal of becoming a top Pharisee himself. He tried to score big for himself by putting down the Christian movement. He was in charge of executing Stephen, the first martyr (Ac 8:1). He had many Christians in Jerusalem arrested and put them in prison. That was not all. He obtained an authorization letter from the Sanhedrin to go to Damascus to arrest more Christians there. He did everything to seek his own glory. But Christ changed this ambitious man. The Risen Lord met him on his way to Damascus with a blinding light. Jesus saved him from his sins and called him to be a light to the Gentiles. Paul experienced the amazing grace of God. Now he wanted to please and glorify the name of Jesus. He wanted to boast only about Jesus. He said, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The Judaizers boasted about their circumcision. They said, “We keep the law, so we are better.” It was their self-righteousness and self-glorification. But Paul says that through the cross of Jesus the world was crucified to him and he was crucified to the world (14). To be crucified is to die. The world died to him and he died to the world. He said, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (2:20).

Paul had experienced the power of the cross. Christ saved a terrible sinner like him. It was an unthinkable thing. How could an enemy of God, a persecutor of the church, be saved? But that was the grace of God he personally experienced. It was the power of the cross. Paul boasted in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. He said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of everyone who believes: first for the

Jew, then for the Gentile” (Ro 1:16). Paul wanted all Gentiles to come to Jesus and receive the same salvation grace.

Paul’s testimony serves as a model for all of us as we serve the work of God. We also have something to boast about ourselves such as academic achievements, good looks, athletic abilities, high IQs, good jobs, etc. But we should consider them rubbish, or at least not as important as our relationship with Christ. Like Paul, let us not boast about anything except in the cross of Jesus. Paul said, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (2Co 11:30).

Third, the only thing that counts (15). Let us read verse 15 together. *Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.* The Judaizers put so much emphasis on circumcision. They wanted to feel good about keeping the law. The problem was that they set aside the amazing grace of our Lord Jesus who paid the price of our sins on the cross. Paul reminds us in this letter that no one can be saved by the law. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything as far as our salvation is concerned. What counts is a new creation.

How can we become a “new creation”? It is through faith in Jesus. 2 Corinthians 5:17 declares, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” As Paul says time and again in this letter, we are “not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16). When we believe in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, God baptizes us with the Holy Spirit (3:2). We are adopted into God’s family as his sons and daughters (3:26). Because we are his children, God sends the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father” (4:6). We are given a new life in Christ. We live a new life in Christ as a new creation. What does it mean to live as a new creation? It means to live by the Spirit (5:13,16), bearing the fruit of the Spirit (5:22-23). We no longer live to gratify our sinful nature as we used to (5:13). Rather we use our freedom in Christ to build up each other. Our faith in Christ expresses itself through love (5:6). We strive to serve one another in love (5:13).

To live as a new creation is to live a life that shows a person’s inward change. It is a transformation in the core, not a window dressing or cosmetic change. It is easy for us to pay attention to our outward appearance before people. The legalist does this. He wants to show to others that he is better by keeping the law. He goes around to boast about what he does which is visible. In his mind, this is a substitute for the relationship with God. But Paul says that this does not count. God sees our hearts. Only our relationship with him matters. If we do good things, they come from our relationship with the Lord. Therefore, to live as a new creation, we should examine what is in our hearts.

In this letter, Paul showed the Galatians the contrast between circumcision (salvation by work) and a new creation (salvation by God’s grace). Is this relevant to us today? Yes. Think about the difference between the gospel of Jesus Christ and many other religions of the world. All other religions emphasize men’s own works to achieve salvation. They have produced suicide bombers in one extreme and meditation yoga in

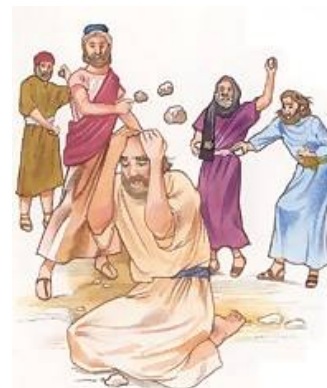
other extreme. But we have Jesus Christ who sacrificed his life to redeem us. His grace is sufficient. We do good things, not because we can earn salvation through them, but because we know we have been saved by God's grace alone.

Look at verse 16. *Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.* What is the universal rule Paul laid down for all churches? The universal rule is that circumcision does not mean anything. External appearance, works and human achievements without a transformation of our inner being does not mean anything before God. What counts is a change in our life—a new creation by the Holy Spirit. So how can we keep our ministry focused on becoming and living as new creations? In 5:16, Paul said, “*So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*” To walk by the Spirit is to listen to the Spirit and to follow the Spirit's leading each day. It is a personal relationship and it is spiritual. The work of the Holy Spirit may be invisible, as we cannot measure it by external standards. But there is no denying the work of the Spirit as we can see the fruit of the Spirit. The Spirit bears fruit in us. Jesus said, “Each tree is recognized by its own fruit” (Lk 6:44). We will become more and more like Jesus, who was full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Paul gives a blessing of peace and mercy to all who follow the universal rule, even to the Israel of God. The Israel of God today is those who are in Christ Jesus. If we belong to Christ, then we are Abraham's descendants according to God's promise (3:28-29). This new community is characterized by “peace and mercy” (16). We have freedom in Christ but we don't abuse it. Instead, we live by the Spirit, bearing the fruit of the Spirit, carrying our own load, while carrying each other's burdens in our community.

Fourth, “I bear the marks of Jesus” (17-18). Paul says in verse 17. *Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.* Paul was deeply troubled by the Galatian believers' backsliding because of the false teachings. His heart was broken. He was a shepherd for them. He felt pain. His pain was caused by their wavering faith. He told them to stop causing him any more trouble by remembering how much he suffered for Christ. He said he bore on his body the marks of Jesus. The “marks” (*ta stigmata* in Greek) may refer to fire “brandings” on slaves to indicate ownership or “tattoos” on the body to show one's identification. Shep.

Chris has a Genesis 12:2 tattoo to show his decision to be a source of blessing to many. In Revelation we learn that those who follow Satan will have the mark of the beast, 666. We don't know if St. Paul had a tattoo on him. Most likely it was the scar marks on his body that were inflicted by the Jews who stoned him for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul was thrown into prison frequently, was flogged severely and exposed to death again and again. Five times he received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times he was beaten with rods (2Co 11:23-25). Acts 14:19-20 says: “Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered



around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.” Paul put his life on the line to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with the Gentiles. Paul wanted them to remember this. Paul ended his letter with a final blessing for the Galatian believers. He said, *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen* (18).

We learned today that habitual religious activities do not matter before God. The only thing that counts is a new creation, that is, the transformation of our inner beings as we commit our lives to Christ who died for our sins. When our hearts are changed by God, we can live a happy life that bears the fruit of the Spirit. It is not a joyless, superficial religious life, but it is a joyful life with Christ. May God help us to live a life of knowing Jesus personally and serving him to the end!