

A new creation

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[0:00] Your Bibles at Galatians chapter 6. So we're coming to the end of the book of Galatians.

Quite a challenging book I think we've found in some parts as we've been through. And the book of Galatians lacks the personal greeting that we find at the end of many of Paul's letters.

And yet we have this postscript which is really intensely personal. As he tells us in verse 11, he's given his scribe who would have written the letter down.

That's what one would have done in those days, no word process. You employed a professional scribe to do your writing for you. But Paul has given his scribe the afternoon off.

And completes the letter in his own handwriting as he tells us. It's obviously in a relatively unpracticed hand and has large letters.

[1:22] And in fact perhaps his unpracticed hand becomes a metaphor for both his own struggles and the struggles that the Galatians have had. So what have we found in this book?

Well in the first two chapters, you remember, Paul has warned us against hypocrisy. Particularly the hypocrisy of those who keep parts of the law but not all of it.

And he has established his own credentials as an apostle. And he will return to that in this closing passage. And then in chapters 3 and 4, he argued powerfully that the true children of Abraham are not children by law but children by promise.

And the promise was that all nations of the earth would be blessed in Abraham. And Paul puts this rather odd argument forward that there is only one seed and the seed is Jesus Christ.

And everything finds its promise, finds its fulfillment in Jesus. All the requirements of the law are fulfilled in Jesus. And in him, if we are in him, we are inheritors of the promise.

[2:37] And then in chapters 5 and the beginning of chapter 6, Paul has argued that that doesn't mean, because we're no longer under law, it doesn't mean we can do as we like.

But rather exactly the reverse, that we need to learn to walk in step with the Spirit. Let me just read again those verses from Galatians 5, 19 to 25.

It just reminds us what he meant by that. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious. Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like.

I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Against such things there is no law, as we might say you can't legislate for those. And then he goes on to say, those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

[3:58] Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. And again, Paul picks up this idea in these last few verses as well.

So in these final verses, Paul draws his letter to a close. And if the handwriting might be ungainly, the writing is not. This coda is an absolute gem.

We find that all the complex arguments of the epistle are summed up in just these few verses. And it is worth, what I always like to do, just take a few moments, just studying the way that the passage is put together.

So I've pointed out a few things about the passage. There is a sandwich, a chiasm here. It starts in verse 11 with a personal greeting and returns to that in verse 18.

In verse 12, he talks about marks in the flesh. And in verse 17, he talks about his own marks in the flesh. Verse 13, he talks about law as the rule for life.

[5:05] And in verse 16, he talks about a different rule for life. And then right in the center, we have this idea of the new creation. And that tells us then that this new creation is the key idea of the passage.

This is what he really wants us to think about. But if there is this sandwich structure, there is also obviously a linear development in these last few verses.

Paul has been involved in a lot of controversy, a lot of arguments. But here, as I say, his untidy writing is almost a metaphor for the confusion and untidiness of the situation in Galatia.

But in these last few verses, he moves from untidiness and conflict and confusion towards his aim of grace and peace.

And as we look at this passage, we'll see how he does that. And it says how the people who are really making trouble are the circumcision party.

[6:15] And how in Christ, grace and peace is to be found. So let's pull a few threads of this tapestry and see what we can learn from them.

Excuse me. So we'll look first at these troublemakers. Who are the real troublemakers? Who are the real peacemakers? And what is the true gospel?

What is the gospel really about? And then we'll look at Paul's measure, rule for life. And what is that?

It is in Christ alone. So since we've been thinking about the Reformation, I've given the Latin as well, solo Christo. In Christ alone. Christ is the measuring rod of all things.

And then we'll dive in and look at this idea of the new creation in Christ Jesus to see exactly what Paul means by it.

[7:17] So that's what we're going to do. So let's look first of all at these troublemakers, these peacemakers and what the true gospel is about.

So what was the motivation, one might ask, for those who were advocating circumcision and advocating that the Gentiles be circumcised?

They clearly weren't doing it for no reason. They must have had some purpose in mind. And I think Paul understands and hints here about some of the reasoning behind it. These people think they're actually promoting the unity of God's people and think they're actually avoiding unnecessary trouble in verse 12.

Seems to be the suggestion. So how might that happen? How might that work? Well, firstly, of course, keeping circumcision would make Christianity much more palatable to Orthodox Jews. Even if the Christians had stopped keeping all the Jewish rituals. If they kept circumcision, that Abrahamic mark of the covenant, then that would certainly have made it more palatable to Orthodox Jews.

[8:36] And secondly, he says it might help to avoid persecution. It's not entirely clear what he means, but perhaps he's suggesting, referring to the fact that under Roman law, the Jews did have certain legal freedoms that were not given to other religions.

And so if Christians can be seen as a sect of Judaism, then they might sort of get some of that protection of Roman law. Perhaps that's what he was thinking of.

Or maybe he was just saying they wouldn't be persecuted by the Jews. But some may or other, they were hoping, but keeping this mark of circumcision. Paul tells us they were hoping to avoid some suffering and difficulty.

And to say this clear covenant marker might get around the fact that the Jewish Christians didn't actually keep most of the law. Verse 13.

And perhaps Paul talks about boasting in the sign. And thirdly, then perhaps, as Alan Cole puts it in his commentary, circumcision was good for the religious statistics.

[9:45] It makes it easy to boast. Circumcision makes it easy to count the number of Gentile converts. And if there's any doubt, you just show the cut.

And remember that the Romans liked to bath in public. And so at the public bars or at the athletic stadium, the converts would have been obvious. On the other hand, of course, the Greeks considered circumcision as mutilation.

So to a Greek or Roman to be circumcised would be a big step. And that's why it was, of course, a problem. One reason why it was a problem for them. So that's perhaps what the circumcision party were thinking.

Something along those lines. Now, this may not directly be an issue for us. But the thinking behind it might well be an issue for us. Because what they were thinking, of course, is why not tailor the message for the society in which we are operating?

This will avoid possible opposition. And it will be good for the statistics. Lots of people will be able to tick the Christian box on the census form. Contextualization, you may have come across.

[11:04] It's a kind of buzzword at the moment. And, of course, there is a right form sort of contextualization. We do need to speak the gospel into our culture. Indeed, that's exactly what the reformers did those 500 years ago.

They didn't exist in a separate world. We do need to speak to the culture around us. But it carries with it a danger. Why not blur some issues?

Why not blur the lines on sexuality and gender? If you do that, it will put us on the same wavelength as the secular liberals. And it will get us heard on the BBC, won't it?

Christians get heard on the BBC, or people who claim to be Christians, when they come out in favor of gay marriage or something like that. And it would certainly avoid possible problems with the equality laws.

Or we might say, well, we want our gospel to be relevant, don't we, to our Western society. And our Western society is quite a comfortable one.

[12:12] So what's wrong with this prosperity gospel idea? I mean, Jesus did say that I come, I'm come that they might have life, mightn't they? What does life mean to Westerners?

It means parties and luxury holidays, doesn't it? That's what the quality of life is about for Westerners. So let's go with that, perhaps. Except that, of course, that is to completely undermine what the gospel actually has to say.

Jesus said, the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And in fact, we can identify there's actually a double temptation here.

On the one hand, we can try to make ourselves look indistinguishable from the world by adopting its lifestyle. That, in a sense, was what the circumcision party were trying to do as far as the Jews were concerned.

We can try and make us look indistinguishable from the world so that people can't say what difference it makes at all. Or, which would have been more of an issue for the Gentiles being forced to have circumcision, we can deliberately make ourselves look different by imposing arbitrary restrictions and rules.

[13:31] And what's Paul's point here? He says that both these approaches miss the point. It's not circumcision or uncircumcision. It's just not the point at all.

Paul is determined to point out that if we try and become relevant in this sort of way, we lose the very thing that gives the church its life and meaning. Because our message is Christ crucified. And Christ crucified is an affront to everybody, Jew or Greek. That's what marks us out as different from this world.

The world is dead to us and we to the world. Our message is a simple one in some ways. Christ and him crucified, Paul said in Ephesians, didn't he? I was determined to know nothing among you except Christ and him crucified.

And yet, as we were thinking this morning, it is a message which is rich and complex in all its implications as we start to live that out. But this is by the same token of the cross, offensive to the world.

[14:38] We can't lose the offense of the cross. We need to be relevant, of course. But that relevance consists not in pretending that there's no difference between Christian and secular thought.

On the contrary, it consists in showing the world where it's wrong. As again, we were thinking this morning, as those reformers did 500 years ago.

But still, perhaps it would be good to have some outward expression of the faith. We could wear old-fashioned clothes to appear modest. We could look for something a bit exotic, like tongue speaking or faith healing.

Or we could just impose arbitrary rules on dancing or TV watching, as, say, was perhaps more popular a couple of generations ago. Surely there must be some outward visible mark of the covenant people.

Well, okay, Paul does acknowledge that, yes, there are marks. He says so in verse 17. But what are these marks?

[15:53] Well, the... Sorry, I should have gone on to the slide. What are these marks? The Greek word there is *stigmata*, and some people have tried to claim that refers to the actual image of the marks of the croissant, of the hands and feet.

But that seems a very strange interpretation. Surely a much more natural interpretation is Paul saying, well, what are the outward marks that show me to be a faithful servant and apostle? They're surely the scars on his back from when he was imprisoned and beaten. They were surely the injuries sustained in his dangerous journeys, in his shipwrecks, when he was lowered down the wall to get out of a city, even after being chased.

Surely these are the true *stigmata*, the true marks of the apostle. And they are the marks of which all... show that truly Paul has shared in Christ's suffering.

We may not have quite the injuries that Paul had, but if we ask for what the marks of the apostle are, the marks of the true Christian are, what the *stigmata* are, then they are the marks of Christ's sharing in Christ's suffering.

[17:21] Everything is found in Christ, and that brings us to our next heading. It doesn't come over so well in the English, but there is law and there is rule in verse 16.

Now, in English, they can mean almost the same thing, but here they don't. The distinguishing is being made. Law, as the Jews understood it at least, or as the Jews of... of the Pharisees understood it, consisted on a series of acts, rituals and ceremonies that marked you out as the covenant people. And if you ticked all the right boxes, you were okay.

You were righteous. But of course, this approach leads to a culture of externals. Just ticking the boxes, it doesn't matter what's going on in your heart.

as long as you do the right stuff. And of course, a useful byproduct of this sort of way of looking at the law is as long as you do tick the right boxes, you have a very good reason to shun and look down on those who live differently, don't you?

[18:35] Who don't tick the right boxes. It's a very divisive understanding of the law. But this never was the true purpose of the law, as almost every Old Testament prophet would proclaim.

Most of the time, in vain, people wouldn't listen. And so a different understanding is required. And that's what Paul calls here a rule in verse 16.

And the Greek word there is *kanon*, from which you get words canonical and things like that. But that's actually slightly misleading because the original meaning of the word, according to Strong's, is a ruler or a measure.

It's an instrument which a craftsman or builder will use to ensure that the construction is being put together correctly.

Or it will be used by an official at the games to ensure that the athlete's jump is correctly measured and recorded. And so it's not a box to tick.

[19:37] It's a tool, a way of ensuring that things are being done properly. Because after all, architects and builders need measuring instruments, don't they?

But the measurement isn't the essential feature of architecture. The purpose of architecture is not to measure things. But we do need to measure things to build. But the design is something grander than that, isn't it?

The measure is there simply to ensure that the design is being properly implemented. And that's why we find that the fruit of the Spirit in that well-known verse 523 that I read earlier is expressed in positive, internal heart terms rather than external negatives.

Those fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, long-suffering and so on, it's very difficult to make them into tick boxes. They are attitudes of the heart and mind.

You can't sort of tick today, yes, I was long-suffering today, which you probably weren't anyway, but it would be very hard to do. The fruit of the Spirit is about what we should think and do, what is right, not about forbidding what there is to avoid, although, of course, there are things to avoid, as we saw in chapter 5, verse 19.

[21:03] But this rule, the true use of the law, is about the construction of the heart to ensure a sound construction. So what is this rule?

And the detailed arguments can get a bit complex, as we saw in chapters 3 and 4. But here's a simple principle that anyone can get their head around, as it were. And the rule is that, as I've said, that great cry of the Reformation, solo Christo, Christ alone.

Paul makes this quite clear in verses 14 and 15 here, doesn't it? And that's why, in chapter 3, verse 16, Paul said, there is only one seed of Abraham, and that seed is Christ.

And in 3.29, Paul told us that we are Abraham's children through Christ. It's in Christ we inherit. And it's in Christ we do everything else.

And so that's a simple rule, a rule of thumb, one translation calls it, and maybe that's not too bad a way of looking at it. It's a simple rule. If your teaching contains anything that does not point to Christ, then, that doesn't sum up everything in Christ, then to that extent your doctrine is wrong.

[22:27] Since one could hardly have a simpler rule than that, could we? And yet, sometimes it's hard to make sure we're keeping it. But that is the rule, everything in Christ. If you think in those terms, then you're not going to go wrong.

And this was the error of the circumcision party. They focused on something that detracted from Christ, that pointed away from Christ to something different, instead of pointing to the new creation. creation. And as I said, that's the key idea here, the new creation, the rebuild.

So what is this grand design? What is this architectural project? Is it a refurbishment or is it a new build? And actually, in a sense, I suppose Galatians doesn't give an entirely clear answer to that because, in a sense, it is a bit of both because Paul reminds us that the promise went right back to Abraham.

He told us that in chapter 3, verse 16. In fact, Paul could have traced it right back to Eve, couldn't he? And the promise of one who would crush the head of the serpent.

[23:44] And he told us that God is one in chapter 3, verse 20. And ultimately, there is only one way to God, by grace through faith. And that was true of the Old Testament just as much as in the New Testament.

And yet, there is a sense in which it is radically new because the prophet Jeremiah, it's an easy reference to remember, Jeremiah 31, 31, had promised a new covenant, a different covenant written on the heart.

Because, why did we need that? because the people had not kept the old covenant. And so, Jeremiah had promised a new covenant. And certainly, in the experience of each individual believer, there must be a new birth, as Jesus told us, as Jesus insisted on.

That each believer must be, have such a radical change that you can think of it as being born again. And so, Paul describes it not so much as a new build in verse 15, as a new creation.

And so, as I've said, those who insisted on circumcision were not just giving the wrong answer, they were actually asking the wrong question. if you ask a silly question, you can't expect a sensible answer, as we used to say.

[25:07] I haven't heard that saying so much recently, but as I was a child, people used to say that, ask a silly question, you'll get a silly answer. And the circumcision party, in a sense, were asking a silly question.

The question of whether we need circumcision is not a yes or no thing. That's what Paul says in verse 15, isn't it? In fact, it's no longer relevant at all. what matters is participation, not in some ritual cutting, but participation in the cross.

And if the circumcision was a sign of anything, it was a sign of cutting, as it were, the seed of Adam, the descendants from Adam to the new covenant.

But what really cuts us off from the sins of Adam is participation in the cross, verse 14, through which the old self has died and the new self is born.

There is a death before a new birth. We participate in the death of Christ. And then you might say, well, hang on though, Paul, you say that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

[26:30] But your handwriting is still the same old scroll that Saul had, isn't it? If we're really a new creation, why do we need the rule at all?

And of course, when we talk about a new birth, a death in Christ, sharing in the death of Christ and a new birth, it doesn't mean we actually forget our old life before that.

It's not a new birth in that sense. We are still, in one sense, the same people we were before we were converted, before the new birth. But nevertheless, it is a truly new creation.

But we might say then, if it's a new creation, why do we need a rule at all? It's a fair question, isn't it? Why do we still struggle against sin and doubt and confusion?

In fact, shouldn't walking in step with the Spirit, as Paul tells us to do, shouldn't that be as natural and instinctive as walking across the room? Surely we don't need any rule at all.

[27:37] Well, certainly, actually, that's what we're aiming for. Paul tells us in Romans 12, 1 and 2, that we need to be, have our minds transformed. Then we'll know what God's good and perfect will is.

But it is also true that the construction is still going on. The temple is still being built. And so, in that sense, we do need that rule of all things being summed up in Christ.

Once the temple is built, it will be obvious. We don't need to remind ourselves of the fact. But until then, we do. Not until the construction is complete will the builder pack away his laser level and his theodolite.

When the building is complete, the instruments, the rules, the measures will no longer be needed. But at present, the church is still a work in progress. And at present, each individual life is still a work in progress.

And so, we need that measure. We need to be reminded to walk in step with the Spirit because it's not yet perhaps instinctive to us. And yet, even now, some of the glory, future glory of that temple can be seen.

[28:58] Paul talks about peace, doesn't he, to the true Israel, referring, doubtless, to those Old Testament Psalms like the one we sung that refer to peace be to Israel.

What does Israel mean? The name, of course, means prince of God. It's a royal name, a name of glory. glory. And some of that future glory can be seen even now in the church and in the individual believer.

We're not yet what we should be, but someone once said by the grace of God, we're not what we were either. And the church is a, as it were, a prototype of the kingdom.

And as we live, by the values of the kingdom here, even in this world, some of that glory should be visible. And that way we should be, the world should see what the gospel is about.

That's what we should be showing. See how these Christians love one another. See how they support and encourage one another.

[30:14] and the true Israel is a nation of peace.

The true Israel is, in the last times, the war trumpet will be hung on the wall as one of the psalms says. I can't remember which one it is now, but it struck me as a great image that, that the war trumpet will be hung on the wall and you just imagine a little boy coming in with his grandfather and saying, what's that up on the wall there, granddad?

Oh, that's a war trumpet. That's what we used to use to call the people to war. But we don't need it anymore. It's just a relic now. It's just a souvenir because the true Israel, the values of the kingdom of peace.

And so at the end of his letter, Paul turns away, doesn't he, from controversy. He finishes with a benediction. Unusually, it includes a blessing on himself.

Did you notice that? Don't get that very often, I think. But in verse 17, he actually pronounces a blessing, a benediction on himself that the troublemaker should trouble him no longer.

[31:36] But peace and mercy should rest upon God's people, verse 16. And there's a hint there, isn't there, of Aaron's words of number six, that Aaronic blessing, that this is how you should bless Israel and that peace

and mercy should rest upon the people of God, the true Israel.

But actually, Paul goes a bit further than Aaron, doesn't he? It's not just peace and mercy that Paul promises, but grace.

We're thinking about this on Wednesday, weren't we? And sure, it's a formal greeting, it's a formal way to start or end a letter. But actually, it matters whose grace is being offered, doesn't it?

I mean, if you, as a Roman, I suppose, if you got a letter that said grace from the emperor, that would mean more to you than, you know, some, when your mate from the next town said the same thing.

Whose grace is being offered is of some importance, even if it is a formal greeting. And whose grace is being offered here, not from the emperor, but from the king of kings, from the anointed king, God's own anointed king, Jesus.

[33:05] So what does this say? Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. It says that those who are in Christ, those who have adopted this rule of Christ in all, are rebels, yes, but they've been transformed into favored subjects of King Jesus, and not because they in any way deserved it, but just because of God's love.

This was the great doctrine of Martin Luther, wasn't it? But he didn't invent it. It was the doctrine of Paul. It was the doctrine, indeed, of Jesus himself, that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and that it is the tax collector who goes into the temple and says, Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

There is the one who goes home justified by God. And this grace is for those for whom Christ died, verse 14. Christ died for his people.

It's for those whom God calls and gives a new birth. You can't choose to be born, it just happens to you, and the new creation, the new birth comes through the Spirit.

But at the same time, let's remember that this is not something that's available only to some privileged few, not available just if you're Jewish or if you're rich or anything else.

[34:31] On the contrary, it's open to any who will put their trust in this rule of Christ crucified, Christ alone. If you are excluded from that, it's nobody's fault but your own.

Jesus said, whosoever will may come. Galatians 5, 4 says the following, you who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ.

You've fallen away from grace. So if we're not seeking everything in Christ, if we don't find all our doctrine, all our gospel, all our meaning in being crucified with Christ and being raised with him, being, Phil was reminding us this morning, being made more human, not less human, but more human by the gospel, then we've fallen away from grace.

The grace no longer of the Lord Jesus Christ does not apply to us. So, solo Christo, everything in Christ. And so why not be sharers in Christ's death so that you can take on his life?

Why not seek that peace? And this is a better peace than any diplomat can negotiate. You have to admire those diplomats who try and bring peace, negotiators over Europe, negotiators in Syria and other troubled places who try and bring peace.

[36:25] And sure, that's a good thing to do. But the peace that's being talked about here is a deeper peace than that. It's a peace that goes all the way down into the Christian's spirit in verse 18.

It's the peace that the world cannot give or find. The peace in the heart that is fine through the life in Christ. And it is that that causes us to say hallelujah, let's rejoice that we are dead in Christ and raised to life with him.

So let's sing 453. go ahead and ready. Let's go ahead and ready. Let's go ahead and ready. Let's go ahead and ready. Let's go ahead