

Galatians 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Galatians chapter 6 Let the one who has taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.

Do not be deceived. God is not mocked. For whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption.

But the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good. For in due season we will reap if we do not give up.

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.

It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.

[1 : 27] But far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen. In Galatians chapter 6, Paul brings the argument of his epistle to a conclusion.

He has just listed the fruit of the spirit in verses 22 to 23 of the preceding chapter. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

As John Barclay observes, these fruit are given concrete form in the communal maxims that follow. Verses 1 to 10 discuss the shape that the life of the Christian community must take, and it is one marked by the fruit of the spirit throughout.

[2 : 34] As Barclay remarks, The fruit that springs from the spirit's life is here identified in the delicate negotiation of communal relations, in behavioural qualities fostered over time.

The love that stands at their head is inherently social. If faith is operative in love, in 5 verse 6, it could never be reduced to an individual relationship to Christ.

The chapter begins with counsel for how to restore a sinning brother. It is addressed to those who are spiritual, to people who are living in the life of the spirit. Grace, gentleness and humility are the means by which this must be done.

We do not wield people's sins against them as means of building ourselves up, but gently and carefully reach out to them as fellow sinners. Having recognised and sought to remove the logs in our own eyes, we won't be inclined to vaunt ourselves over others, or to believe that we are above or immune to the pull of sin.

So often we see the sins of others as fuel for our self-righteous superiority. However, if we are spiritual, our desire will be the building up of the body of Christ and the deliverance and restoration of the sinner.

[3 : 44] The flesh pits us against each other, each person living for his own sake and for his own advancement. The condemnation of the law is a weapon that we can wield against each other, seeking to imprison our enemies in guilt and condemnation, so that we might gain social and moral advantage over them.

As Paul described it in the preceding chapter, this is biting and devouring each other, and those who practice this form of life will ultimately get consumed themselves. In a society of individuals competing against each other for honour, sin is an opportunity for competitive advantage,

something to be seized upon, often in subtle ways.

This perverse desire in us can even infect the way that harmful yet delicious gossip about others is shared under the guise of prayer points. Bringing public dishonour upon others can burnish our reputation by comparison.

Yet a spiritual community responds to such moments with grace and gentleness. They are especially vigilant at such times not to be trapped in the sin of pride, to which we can so easily fall prey at such moments.

Recognition of our own vulnerability to sin brings humility, which puts us in a better position to restore others. And the alternative to the competitive pursuit of honour is the willing adoption of the work of slaves.

[5 : 06] We bear one another's burdens. This is the work of service, but not now of a class of slaves to their masters, but of each person to his neighbour. We are all to be slaves of each other in love, a reciprocal form of relationship where no person is ultimately placed over others.

We all stand on the same level ground of grace, and everyone willingly places others before themselves. In placing others before ourselves, we are simply following the law of Christ himself, for this is the way that our Master took with us.

He is our Master, yet he ministered to us in love. In this way our lives are lived according to the rule of Christ, but this is also the way in which the moral purpose of the Torah is achieved.

Adopting the way of service is informed by an honest self-appraisal, where we recognise that when it comes to the game of honour, we are all ultimately bankrupts.

The game of honour is built around the projection of a false and inflated image of our righteousness, in a competitive realm of mutual display, and we reject this way of boasting.

[6 : 11] Yet we adopt a new boast. We boast in the cross of Christ, by which we've died to this old world of competitive honour, with its biting and devouring of each other. We now boast in Christ, a boast proclaimed on the basis of our own bankruptcy.

Whether circumcision or uncircumcision, we have no status with God that is not ultimately founded upon completely unmerited grace in Christ. When we minister to others, we must always primarily test our own work.

Paul knows that we can so easily take up a moral interest in others, in order to deflect from our own moral responsibilities. Ultimately, we will all bear our own loads, as we have to give account of ourselves, not our neighbour, before God on the last day.

We should not be so preoccupied with helping out all of our neighbours with the moats in their eyes, that we have not dealt with the logs in our own. Under the teaching of bearing one another's burdens, Paul gives the example of teachers and learners.

This is a classic asymmetric relationship, a hierarchical relationship that many would think of. However, Paul wants us to see how it too can be subject to this principle that breaks down the hierarchy.

[7 : 23] The teacher is not to place themselves over the learner, and the learner is to consider themselves and to act as a minister to those teaching them, as they minister to those ministering to them in prayer, encouragement, financial support, hospitality and all these other things, all stand together under the authority of Christ in the mutual dependence of his body.

We so easily see other people's gifts as threats to our own honour, but in the spirit we each employ our gifts for the service of our neighbours and so overcome the competitive struggle of honour that many labour under.

Paul solemnly warns the Galatians against carelessness in their lives. We either sow to the flesh or we sow to the spirit, and there will be harvests. God is not mocked.

Those who act according to the flesh will ultimately face the consequences and rewards of their way of life. Those, for instance, who have given themselves to biting and devouring others will find that they too are consumed.

However, those who sow to the spirit will end up reaping eternal life. The process of sowing to the spirit is one that takes self-control, takes patience and perseverance, yet sowing to the flesh comes quite naturally.

[8 : 38] Life has its seasons of sowing, seasons where we are making decisions and developing habits and developing contacts and relationships that will have their consequences many years down the line.

Then we have seasons of reaping, when we receive the consequences of the ways of life to which we have given ourselves. These can be periods of crisis, times when we realise the mistakes that we have made.

Such times tend to hit at particular seasons of people's lives. We talk about the midlife crisis, for instance. Recognising these times of harvest, we need to be careful what we are sowing.

For Paul, it is clear that eternal life will not be received apart from living in the spirit. We do not receive our standing with God on the basis of anything we are or anything we have done.

Yet our union with Christ, who alone is the basis of our standing with God, is lived out in the life of the spirit. And those who do not produce the spirit's fruit demonstrate that they have no part in him.

[9 : 38] It can be so easy to grow weary in doing good. We see the wicked prosper. We see the wicked being honoured. While we can suffer and be shamed. Yet if we faithfully persevere, we can be assured of a reward.

And the wicked, for their part, will finally receive the harvest of their actions too. The Judaizers are concerned to make a good showing in the realm of competitive mutual display of the flesh.

They are very concerned to look good to the unbelieving Jews by downplaying the scandal of the cross, defining themselves primarily by Torah observance. Indeed, circumcising the Galatian Christians and bringing them over to the way of Torah observance as proselytes is a means by which they can look better to their unbelieving Jewish neighbours.

See, we've made some converts. As Christians, it can be so easy to be trapped in the realm of the flesh ourselves, concerned to appear good to unbelievers, for whom we will use our fellow Christians as means to advance ourselves.

Perhaps we will broadcast and emphasise their sins to make us look good by comparison. Or perhaps we will disown them, as the Judaizers might have disowned Paul in order to appear to be on the right side.

[10 : 50] Perhaps we will, like the Judaizers, fearfully go down the way of pursuing conformity with the cultural norms in order to downplay the scandal of the faith. Yet because of the cross of Christ, Paul has been crucified to this old world, this old world of mutual display, competitive honour, and seeking the approval of men.

Christ's crucifixion was the ultimate in a dishonourable death, a body stripped and beaten, spat upon and marked, hung, impotent and exposed on a wooden cross as a public shame.

This is the absolute negation of the world of the flesh. Yet this is the badge of honour. It's the defining event for the Christian. When Paul says that he bears in his body the marks of Jesus, he might be referring to the deep welts in his back from whips, the crooked gate of a man whose body has been battered by many cruelties, the signs of a person that the world has spat out much as it spat out his master at Calvary.

For such a person, what remains? Not the old structures of honour in the world of the flesh, things like circumcision and the competitive pursuit of social status and advantage and advancement over others, but a new creation.

Paul pronounces a blessing upon everyone who has adopted this pattern of Christ, the way of life that is founded upon and defined by him, not by the works of the law, not by the status of the Torah, not by the honour that is given by men, but by the grace of God, an event that overcomes and nullifies all of these status and honour games that we play.

[12 : 33] In giving this blessing, he particularly mentions the Jews who have adopted this way of life, who have grounded their lives not in the honour given by Torah, in circumcision, or in the status that they have as an exclusive nation, but in the grace of God in the cross of Jesus Christ.

They are the Israel of God. A question to consider. How does the Spirit reorient our attitude to doing good to others?

How does this way of life differ from that lived in the flesh?