



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Except in the Cross of Jesus

### Galatians 6:1-18

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Everyone who knows me, I think, knows that I am no fan of Sportzball—of any kind. That goes for Sportzpuck, too. I have poor depth perception, so I've always been absolutely no good in any sport that involves flying or otherwise fast-moving objects. I joined the swim team instead and—to this day—thoroughly enjoy it. As a kid my favourite was to swim in the medley relay swimming backstroke. I was really good at that it was fun to contribute that effort to a relay team. You might not think it, but even on the swim team, as much as it might seem like everyone's competing individually—except for the handful of relay events—even on the swim team, we all had to pull our own weight, we all had to look out for each other to win. I struggled with backstroke for a long time, but in high school one of the upperclassmen who would go on to the US Olympic team, not only encouraged me, but took me aside and worked with me to better my stroke. Because that's what you do when you're on a team.

But here's the thing. We all know this. It's a no-brainer. A team won't win if it doesn't work together, if people don't show up, if everyone doesn't pull his own weight. It's a no-brainer in sports. But then there's the church. In the average church about twenty per cent do eighty per cent of the work. Compare the membership to average Sunday attendance and in the average church there's a significant difference between those two numbers. I've been in churches where average Sunday attendance was less than a third of the actual membership. And, it's been my experience, that instead of coming alongside to help each other when we see problems, too many of us stand on the sidelines and complain amongst ourselves. We've seen a version of this

in Galatians. The team was being pulled apart: Jewish believers here, gentile believers there. They were, as Paul puts it, biting and devouring each other and on the verge of blowing the whole thing up, when they should have been bearing with each other in love. We're supposed to be focused on Jesus and walking by the Spirit, but all too often we end up focused on ourselves and walking according to the flesh. So as we come to Chapter 6, the closing chapter of Paul's letter, he's made his arguments, but before he sums it up in closing, he visits a couple of relevant points about the unity of the church and what life—what teamwork—in a church characterised by the fruit of the Spirit looks like. So, first, Galatians 6:1-5.

**Brothers [and Sisters], if someone is found out in some trespass, then you—the spiritual ones—should set such a person right, in a spirit of gentleness. Watch out for yourselves: you too may be tested. Carry each other's burdens; that's the way to fulfil the Messiah's law. For if you think you're something when you're not, you deceive yourself. Every one of you should test your own work, and then you will have a reason to boast of yourself, not of somebody else. Each of you, you see, will have to carry your own load.**

This is what it looks like to build a community around the fruit of the Spirit instead of the works of the flesh. This is what it looks like to live in love and humility, instead of rivalry and jealousy. Stuff will go wrong. We may be walking by the Spirit, but we're not perfect. And Paul says that when that happens, we need to set each other right in a spirit of gentleness. You who are spiritual, he writes. He might be saying that this is what spiritually mature believers do, but I really think he's writing this as a rebuke to the Galatians. They think they're spiritual, but instead of dealing with each other in gentleness, instead of setting each other right, they're biting and devouring each other. I really don't think this is Paul's instruction to the spiritually mature; it's his instruction to *everyone* to whom Jesus has given his Spirit—and that's all of us—everyone who is in Jesus the Messiah. Brothers and Sisters, when

Paul, in Chapter 5, says to walk by the Spirit, I think our tendency is to picture ourselves walking—each of us alone, each of us doing our own thing in line with the Spirit—but Paul's point here is that we don't do this as individuals. The Spirit joins us into Jesus' one body and we walk by the Spirit together, as a community. That means helping each other when we struggle or fall or stray. And helping means being gentle in the sense that the end goal is restoration and the wholeness and unity of the community. Remember, we follow Jesus who, as Paul put it earlier, "loved me and gave himself for me". We ought to feel the same way towards each other.

It's easy to become prideful. It's easy to look down on a brother or a sister who stumbles—as if it could never happen to us—so Paul warns: Watch out. Someday you might be tested. Instead, we need to be carrying each other's burdens. And now he comes back full circle to this whole debate about the place of the law. He says that it's as we bear with each other in love, gentleness, and humility, it's in this that we actually fulfil the law. We can never fulfil the law through circumcision or diet or keeping the Sabbath, but by being this community that bears and that lives out the fruit of the Spirit—for each other and for the world.

Then, on the other side of the scale, Paul stresses our work, our vocation within this community. He's been warning about these circumcision people who want to "boast" in their circumcision. What he's getting at is that when persecution comes, they'll point out that they're circumcised and can therefore claim the Jewish exemption from pagan worship. Paul says, no! God's given you gospel work to do and he's given you his Spirit to make it possible. "Boast" in that. When your neighbours or the civic officials come to arrest you for being anti-social or anti-patriotic or anti-religious appeal not to your circumcision, but to the gospel, to the kingdom work you and your brothers and sisters have done. In other words, be the "on earth as in heaven" people Jesus and the Spirit have made you and leave the pagans nothing bad to say about you. Don't glorify your flesh; let God be glorified. And with that in mind

he tells them—and us—to get to work. Carry your load. In other words, do the work of the kingdom that God has called and equipped you to do. Don't sit around waiting for that committed twenty per cent to do it; do what God has called you to do. Is there something that needs to be done? Are you equipped to do it? Then don't complain about it. Go do it. Visit that brother or sister in hospital. Mop the kitchen floor. Find an opportunity to talk to your neighbour or your co-worker or your grandchild about Jesus and the gospel. "Each of you," Paul writes, "have to carry your own [part of] the load."

And then, speaking of the loads we each bear within this Messiah community, Paul writes in verse 6:

**If someone is being taught the word, they should share with the teacher all the good things they have. Don't be misled; God is not mocked. What you sow is what you'll reap. Yes: if you sow in the field of your flesh you will harvest decay from your flesh, but if you sow in the field of the Spirit you will harvest eternal life from the Spirit.**

So speaking of everyone doing their part of the work... I'm always impressed by Paul's ability to talk about money without mentioning money. But here it is. There is one job in the church that needs to be paid and I suspect this is Paul's way of saying to the Galatians, "If you'd been doing this, you probably would have avoided the situation you're in." Brothers and Sisters, those who preach and teach in the church need material support so that they can devote themselves to their work. We see this in Acts. There were a lot of things that needed to be done in the Jerusalem church. Good things. Godly things. But the apostles realised that they needed to devote themselves to preaching and to prayer, so they appointed deacons to do those other things. And this means a lot coming from Paul. Paul supported himself making tents. He didn't take money for himself from the churches he served, and yet he's always clear that that's not the norm. He knew that the ministry of

the word is absolutely essential to the church and he knew that it's time-consuming work and the church needs to do its best to make sure those who preach and teach actually have to time to minister the word well.

Brothers and Sisters, you want to see revival? Revival is always preceded—whether we look at the history of Israel or the history of the church—revival is always preceded by a passion for the teaching and preaching of God's word—by preachers who are passionate about proclaiming it and by people who are desperately hungry to hear it. And that same history shows that when the church is at its lowest, there is a famine of the word. Many of us left Mainline churches that were preaching heresy and people wonder how it happened. Brothers and Sisters, it happened because the expositional preaching and the confidence in the inspired word of God that were our heritage, gifted to us by the Reformation, were lost. As John Stott once said, "Sermonettes make Christianettes". It happens in theology liberal churches. It happens in sacramentalist churches. It happens anywhere the glory of God's word has been eclipsed by other priorities. Poorly taught people who don't know their Bibles are prey to heresy and immaturity and that's precisely what's happened. It's what happened in Galatia. And so Paul warns them that they need to support the ministry of men in their churches to give the word of God its due, so that they preach it faithfully and powerfully, so that the churches will grow in the Spirit, know the truth, and recognise error when they see it.

And Paul is then clear: If you think you can do without serious Bible teaching in your church and still steer your way through the false teachers and heresies of the day unscathed, you are fooling yourself. God is not mocked. He has spoken. He has given his word because he loves us, because he wants us to know him, because he wants us to know his promises and his faithfulness so that we can live in hope, so that we can each go out to proclaim the gospel faithfully and so that the church can be what he wants it to be. Brothers and Sisters,

faithful Christians should have a natural hunger for that word and to hear it proclaimed fully and faithfully. Our forebearers back in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, after a millennium-long famine of the word, were eager to hear it. They'd listen to an hour-long sermon Sunday morning, then come back in the afternoon to hear another two or sometimes three preachers proclaim the word—not pop-psychology, not self-help, not sermons where a verse is just a springboard for the preacher to jump into his own ideas, but to hear God's word explained and applied. Because they were hungry to hear God speak.

Paul says: You reap what you sow. There are exceptions. Sometimes you pay a preacher and he turns out to be useless and there are some underpaid preachers who are brilliant, but as a general rule—and one borne out in the history of the church—if you don't take preaching seriously and if you don't invest your church's resources in good preaching, you will end up with a shallow and half-baked pulpit ministry, a famine of the word, and ultimately all sorts of false teaching and heresy.

And still talking about money—again without actually using the word—Paul carries on in verses 9 and 10 with this image of sowing and reaping.

**Don't lose your enthusiasm for doing good. At the proper time you'll bring the harvest in, if you don't give up. So then, while we have the chance, let's do good to everyone and particularly to the household of the faith.**

If we have crucified the flesh and its works and have put on Jesus and are bearing the fruit of the Spirit, good works should naturally follow, but I think Paul has something more specific in mind here, because I can't see any reason he would be concerned that we'd lose our enthusiasm—literally he writes don't weary—of bearing the fruit of the Spirit. What we are prone to losing our enthusiasm for is the sort of works that we do to build up the church or to carry the gospel and the kingdom to the

community around us. That can get very tiring sometimes—especially when you give and give or work and work and nothing seems to come of it or no one seems to appreciate it. I think that's what Paul has in mind. There was a culture of benefaction in the ancient world. Wealthy people would often try to outdo each other in gifts and investments in their towns and cities. They did it for selfish reasons. They wanted to make names for themselves. And I think given that context, Paul's idea here is that Christians need not only to be benefactors within their own churches and supporting their own ministries, but that Christians should also be known as benefactors in their own communities—not for their own sakes, but in order to make the name of Jesus known and as a natural outflowing of the grace of the gospel. We witness God's generosity with us by being generous to others. It's one of the ways we lift the veil on God's new creation. The pagans will accuse Christians falsely in all sorts of ways. Don't weasel out of it by trying to be Jews, exempt from pagan worship. Instead, use your generosity to display the love and grace of mercy of the gospel.

And that then brings Paul full circle, back to this issue of circumcision and *torah*. In verse 11 he gives us a sense of just how passionately he feels about all of this. Letters were normally dictated to a scribe, but here Paul takes the pen in his own hand and writes, **Look at the large-size letters I'm writing to you in my own hand.** This is personal.

Papyrus was expensive and maybe he wanted to stress how important this all was by showing how willing he was to use more of it. Maybe he wanted someone to be able to hold the page up and for the congregation to be able to read it for themselves at a distance. Whatever the case, he comes back to the main issue and stresses how vital it is to their lives as a Christians and as a church. He writes:

**It's the people who want to make a fine showing in the flesh who are trying to force you into getting circumcised—for this purpose only, that they may avoid persecution for**

**the Messiah's cross. You see, even the circumcised ones don't keep the law; rather, they want you to be circumcised, so that they may boast in your flesh.**

The circumcision people are afraid. As long as the church was just Jews everything was fine, but now these formerly pagan gentiles have heard the good news about Jesus and have believed and when they did, they stopped going to the temples, they stopped making offerings to the gods, they smashed their home altars and threw out their household gods, they've stopped offering that pinch of incense to Caesar that he demanded. In doing that, these gentiles converts have angered their friends, families, neighbours, and the civic authorities and so they claimed the exemption that Caesar had granted to the Jews. Except these gentile Jesus-believers, they weren't Jews. They weren't circumcised, they weren't fussy about what they ate, they didn't even keep the Sabbath. And so now the Jews were mad. And they were afraid: What if the authorities revoke our special status and force us to worship pagan gods? That's what all this talk about a show in the flesh and boasting is all about. They wanted to avoid being persecuted for the sake of Jesus and the gospel by putting on a show—a sham of being Jewish. But that sham meant denying the power of the cross. That sham meant denying that in Jesus, God's new world has been born. And so Paul goes on in verses 14 to 16:

**As for me, God forbid that I should boast—except in the cross of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, through whom the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. Circumcision, you see, is nothing; neither is uncircumcision. What matters is new creation. Peace and mercy on everyone who lines up by that standard—yes, on God's Israel.**

Brothers and Sisters, the cross should be our everything. It was for Paul. When the authorities came for these circumcision people, they were going to “boast”—meaning they were going to appeal to their circumcision, to being

under the law. But Paul's saying, when they come for me, God forbid that I should boast in anything other than the cross of our Lord Jesus the Messiah. Think of Philippians 3, where Paul lists all the things he had a right to boast in. If anyone had been faithful to the law, he had. And yet there he swept it all aside as trash because of the Messiah, knowing him, gaining him, being found in him, knowing him and his power, and sharing in the companionship of his sufferings. For Paul, to be persecuted for the sake of Jesus was confirmation of his union with and of his life in the Messiah. Jesus had swept him off his feet and given him a new identity and called him into this cross-shaped life that was the fulfilment of Israel's hope and at the same time the overturning of all his earlier expectations and aspirations. This is what Paul means when he says that he has been crucified to the world. Everything about who he had been as a Jew, a Pharisee, none of it mattered anymore. His old self was dead and buried—crucified with Jesus the Messiah who had fulfilled it all and then launched God's new world. That new life, that new world, Jesus and the Spirit—that's all that mattered to Paul anymore. The cross of Jesus fulfilled and changed everything. And so he sums up everything he's written so far: Circumcision and uncircumcision are nothing—they don't matter—because Jesus has inaugurated God's new creation.

Think of Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 5:17, where he says that if anyone is in the Messiah... new creation! New creation. He just blurts it out. If you're in Jesus the Messiah. If you have trusted him and given him your allegiance. New Creation! God has begun to set us and to set his world to rights and that's what we need to line up with. God's given us his Spirit to get us there. Like a compass, the Spirit draws the line on the map and that line ends in our resurrection and the restoration of all things. But, Brothers and Sisters, you've got to walk that line by the Spirit. Don't stray left or right. Don't let the flesh back. Walk by the Spirit, because God's new creation is all that matters. So peace and mercy, Paul says,

to everyone who lines up by that standard—yes, he says, on God’s Israel. Again, he stresses, circumcision isn’t the answer. You can’t go back to the old Israel of the *torah*. The way forward, is in Jesus and the Spirit—those who are in the Messiah, who walk by the Spirit, they’re God’s Israel, they are now God’s people.

And then finally, verses 17 and 18:

**For the rest, let nobody make trouble for me. You see, I carry the marks of Jesus on my body. The grace of our Lord Jesus the Messiah be with your spirit, my brothers [and sisters]. Amen.**

They wanted to mark out their flesh with circumcision. Far more important for Paul were the marks of persecution that he bore on his body for the sake of the Lord Jesus. He wrote earlier of each of us bearing our own loads. This was his. Eventually it may have been the load borne by some of those Christians in Galatia when persecution came. Paul likens those marks to the branding of a slave. Those cuts and bruises and broken bones marked him out as belonging to Jesus as assuredly as his baptism did. He belonged to Jesus and he would serve Jesus to death and one day he would be raised to new life in God’s new creation and there those marks will be badges of glory. And so Paul closes: Grace to you. The grace of our Lord Jesus the Messiah. Because nothing else matters. May the grace of our Lord Jesus be with your spirit—not your flesh he stresses even as he writes the last words, not your flesh, but with your spirit. It’s interesting the way Paul puts it: “your” is plural but “spirit” is singular as if to stress again the importance of the life of the Spirit as the cornerstone of these little communities of Jesus-followers. If you are in Jesus the Messiah, walk by the Spirit. Give no quarter to the flesh. Don’t be afraid of the Jews or the pagans. Just be faithful to Jesus. Walk the path the Spirit has set for you and he will not only lead you to God’s new creation, but along the way he will make you a witness of that new creation to the world.

Brothers and Sisters, that’s it. Cut through all the issues with *torah* and circumcision and the problems between Jews and gentiles that we see in Galatians, cut through all that and at the heart of it all is Paul’s firm belief that the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah was the turning point in the history of the world—of the history of whole cosmos. I was talking with the woman cutting my hair this week and she asked me, “It’s been a long time. When will they write a New New Testament?” I said they won’t. Because there’s no need. Because Jesus, once and for all changed everything. It won’t happen again because it can’t happen again. It’s done. We’re just waiting—and working towards—the fulfilment of what he started. I don’t think she really understood. And I think a big reason for that—and a big reason why so many people out there (and sometimes even in the church!) don’t understand is because we’re often so bad at living as new creation people. Our problems aren’t the problems of the Galatians, but the results are often the same. In our disunity we undermine the unity that Jesus established for his church, for his family. Some Christians even use the Lord’s Supper, which Jesus gave to bring us together, some use it as a means of emphasising our divisions and of excluding fellow Jesus-followers. Instead of walking by the Spirit, we have our contemporary ways of using our freedom in Jesus as a base of operations for the flesh. Like the Galatians we, too, often allow our fear to undermine our gospel witness. Out of fear of opposition or in hopes of winning over the pagans of our own day, we water down and compromise the gospel or we weave into it the secular philosophies of our own day. We end up proclaiming a message without any power because we’ve stripped it of the offense of the cross, of Jesus, of the life of the Spirit, of God’s new creation. This is epitomised by the website of a local church I was looking at recently. They stripped out any references to A.D.—anno domini, the year of our Lord—replacing them with C.E., the “common era”—I guess, lest

the world be offended by the announcement that Jesus is Lord and that he has changed history and the world.

Brothers and Sisters, we need to take a lesson from Paul. We need to keep Jesus at the centre of who we are. Jesus defined everything for Paul. Jesus called him in the first place. Jesus’ cross defined who Paul became and it shaped the good news he proclaimed. Jesus was the fulfilment of everything that had come before and the one who had set his people free from sin and death. Jesus is the Son whose being sent defines even what we mean by the word “God”. And it’s now Jesus’ Spirit who has caused God’s new creation to be born in us so that we can live as renewed human beings and so that we can live as the beachhead, the advance guard of that new creation as it breaks into the old. Jesus’ death and resurrection marked the end of the old world and the birth of the new. Jesus is the one “who loved me and gave himself for me.” And, Friends, if we are to be faithful, we will be a church with this Jesus at our centre—not just in our theology, but also in our teaching and preaching and in our shared life together. We have been called by love. May we be a church shaped by love and that does everything it can to live by love—the love shown to us by Jesus.

Let’s pray again our Collect: Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*