THE NEW CREATION

Galatians 6:11–18

Key Verse: 6:15

“Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation.”

Sometimes we try to force people to do something we want. Parents force their children to do their homework. Employers force their workers to come on time and do their jobs. Even in the church people are forced to do things, through guilt trips and, frankly, other sorts of bribery. But when a ministry is based on a system of forcing people, it’s not healthy, because when the forcing stops, so does the activity. Nobody can be forced into a relationship with God, into following Jesus, serving him or living the Christian life; it has to come from our hearts. In Galatians Paul has been fighting against the Judaizers’ forcing Gentile Christians to be circumcised, and in these last verses he writes about it again. This time, he exposes their real motives. Instead of circumcision, Paul makes a new rule for all ministries. This “rule” is “the new creation.” He also shares how his own heart, his motives and all his values had been changed so radically. In this study we want to think about what it means to be a new creation, how to become a new creation, and how to really live as a new creation. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Look at verse 11. It seems that this last portion of the letter, verses 11–18, were written in Paul’s own handwriting. In the ancient world people wrote letters all the time, but usually they dictated their words to a secretary who wrote things down. Paul also used this method in writing his letters. But at the end, he would take the stylus and scroll away from the secretary and finish it in his own handwriting (2Th3:17). It was his way of proving that the letter really was from him. In this case, he’s using very large letters. Why? Most likely it was due to his injuries. About six months before writing this letter, Paul had been stoned nearly to death in a Galatian town called Lystra. After the stoning, Paul continued his ministry in Galatia with resurrection faith, not protecting himself or holding back (Ac14:19,20). But physically, the stoning had left its marks on him. It may have damaged his eyesight (Gal4:15), and with a possible head injury, even his fine motor skills. This may be why when writing in his own hand he had to use such large letters. If this was the case, this portion of the letter must have been a heart-moving reminder to the Galatians of Paul’s commitment to the gospel as a matter of life or death. Despite his hard physical situation, what spirit Paul had!

Read verses 12,13. Paul again mentions circumcision. Why does he keep talking about it? It’s because it was such a real problem for these new Gentile Christians. Since they’d just become Christians, it was so easy to influence them. And as Paul had mentioned earlier, the Judaizers were really zealous to win over these Gentiles (4:17). When people are extremely zealous, they can be very persuasive; they can influence us and turn us to a different path. The problem is, it may not be the truth (5:7–9). Paul himself has been writing very passionately and persuasively, but it was based on “the truth of the gospel” (2:5,14; 4:16; 5:7).

Here Paul says the Judaizers “are trying to compel you to be circumcised.” Here the word “compel” in Greek is literally the word “force” (cf. 2:14). Even if it’s good, even if it’s the truth, we can’t force people. We can’t force people to study the Bible, force people to pray, force people to attend meetings or services, force people to teach the Bible or to offer tithe. Why not? It’s because it won’t be coming from their own personal faith. So when the forcing stops, so will the activity. We need to be prayerfully helping people exercise their own personal faith, based on a personal response to the word of God. Our Bible study, prayer, church attendance and serving need to happen not because someone is nagging or pushing us, but because we’ve personally decided to believe God’s promises and obey his commands. For example, Matthew 6:33 says, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” We can’t force people to live with these spiritual priorities; but we can pray that people will take this verse as the personal promise of God, and act on it.

Paul also talks about the Judaizers’ motives. In verses 12,13 he mentions three: to impress people by means of the flesh, to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ, and to boast about “your circumcision in the flesh.” To “impress people” in Greek literally means “to show a good face.” In Asian cultures, honor and saving face are extremely important. People will even commit suicide if they think they’ll be dishonored. But in many other cultures, looking good is more important than content. People in America work hard on their outward appearance, spending lots of time and money on diet and gym membership to look buff, not caring so much about their character. They also want a good-looking house, car and life. This motive can work its way in to ministry. The Judaizers weren’t so serious about keeping the law themselves, but they were serious about forcing Gentile Christians to be circumcised so that they could “save face” before their fellow Jews. In the same way, people want to have the appearance of a fruitful ministry. They want to have many attendants on Sundays or show up to big church events with many so-called converts, not caring about the depth of change in people or the quality of their own personal spiritual life.

We can understand trying to impress people by means of the flesh; it’s a little harder to understand why getting people to be circumcised was a way of avoiding being persecuted for the cross of Christ. But in their community, if people didn’t follow Jewish customs, including circumcision, they would not be accepted or welcomed. Regardless of the cultural context, it’s always been much easier to follow some outward customs than to depend on the cross of Christ as my only righteousness. When we only depend on God’s grace through the cross of Christ, not on any kind of human conformity, we too will experience various forms of persecution. When we don’t conform, we’ll be despised as unspiritual or perceived as rebellious, not to mention being shunned. Our Lord Jesus himself was despised because he didn’t keep Jewish religious customs and became a friend of sinners. Because he hurt their pride, in the end he was crucified.

Lastly, Paul says the Judaizers wanted to “boast” about their circumcision in the flesh. It means they wanted to hold up each Gentile believer as a kind of trophy for their own glory. They wanted people to be impressed by their ability to get Gentiles to become like Jews. It was really twisted. But down through history it’s been the perennial problem for everyone involved in evangelism and discipleship. Evangelism and discipleship are so good, so right, so precious, but our false motives can poison them. Paul wrote elsewhere that it didn’t matter if it were from false motives or true, as long as Christ is preached (Php1:18). But here in Galatians, he says the motive is so important. Earlier, he wrote that the Judaizers were trying so hard because they wanted these new Gentile Christians to be loyal not to Christ but to themselves (4:17). In the same way, many people are trying to find personal validation through ministry. They’re trying to feel better about themselves through ministry. They’re trying to feel loved and appreciated, or to get people’s respect, or even a higher position in a church organization, through boasting about their fruitful ministry. It’s tricky because motives in ministry are invisible. People see appearances, but God can see right into our hearts (1Sa16:7). We should be helping people purely, out of love for Christ and love for them, not out of any self-interested motives.

To emphasize this, Paul again mentions his own personal testimony. Read verse 14. This is one of the most famous Bible verses; so many pastors, missionaries and gospel workers have had Galatians 6:14 engraved on their tombstones. Paul’s example here is meant to be followed by all believers. His motives had been totally changed through the cross of Christ. How so? Before knowing Christ, he’d been working hard as a young Pharisee. He was more zealous for the law than all his fellow Jews. But it was for his own glory. His name, “Saul,” implied that he was a great one. With this motive he was even persecuting Christians, arresting and dragging them off to be stoned to death. He wanted to be seen by the world-wide Jewish community as the most promising young Jewish man. He thought he was so righteous. But after meeting the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, in the light of his presence he finally saw the blackness in his own heart. He saw that he actually wasn’t religious at all; in fact, he was a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man (1Ti1:13), who had wounded and crushed so many people for his own ambition. The Risen Jesus told him it wasn’t Christians he was persecuting, but Jesus himself (Ac9:4,5). Paul realized that in pursuing his own glory he’d been living as an enemy of God, trying to steal God’s glory for himself. This truth forced him to look at the motives in his heart, and inspired him to change his name to “Paul,” a small one. His pride, vanity and self-righteousness were broken. He no longer cared what his fellow Jews thought of him; he cared most about what Christ thought of him.

He wrote back in 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Through the cross of Christ, he fell in love with Christ. He’d tasted a love that made human recognition seem empty. Now, the focus of his life was not himself, but Christ. He was ready to boast about what Christ did on the cross, not about what he did. His only glory was in the cross of Christ. He was ready to suffer anything, not for his own name’s sake, but for Christ’s. He was even ready die for the name of the Lord Jesus (Ac21:13). The cross of Christ had changed his heart that deeply. The pull of the world, especially of human recognition, no longer had any affect on him. This is what it means when he said that “the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” He no longer valued what the world values: honor, status and security. He valued what Christ values: humility, service and self-sacrifice. Now, his motive in helping people was truly pure: to have Christ “formed” in them (4:19). He wasn’t trying to have their bodies marked by circumcision; he was trying to get their hearts engraved by the cross of Christ. Honestly, human glory and recognition are still a powerful temptation for each person. Only the power of the cross of Christ can break their spell on us.

Read verse 15. Paul had written something very similar back in 5:6. Since Christ has been crucified on the cross, circumcision or uncircumcision no longer matter. They’re like any other human consideration, such as religious, ethnic, economic or social background (3:28,29). The only thing that counts now, Paul says, is “the new creation.” What is this “new creation”? It’s what God does when we repent and accept what Jesus did for me on the cross. The Holy Spirit works in us to completely change us. We’re born again as God’s children (Jn1:12,13; 3:3,5–8). 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”

But what does it mean to live as a new creation? It’s life by the Spirit. First of all, it means to have the amazing assurance that God has forgiven all my sins. It means to have a personal conviction about God’s love, that God loves me personally as my true Father (4:6). It means to have the Spirit’s power to resist our sinful nature, the power to walk differently in our daily lives (5:16), in what we pursue and in how we treat others. It means to have a faith that expresses itself through love (5:6). As new creations, we serve one another humbly in love (5:13b). New creations have the good fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control (5:22,23a). In other words, new creations grow in a Christ-like character. Most of all, new creations have experienced new birth into the living hope of the kingdom of God (1Pe1:3,4). When we’re new creations, we believe God’s kingdom is my true inheritance and my final destination, my real life goal. In verse 15 we find what our focus should be, both personally and in our prayers for others. We should be struggling to come to the cross of Christ until we’re truly made into new creations, until we experience the changing power of the Holy Spirit. We also should be praying for others not so much for their human problems or needs, but especially that they can become new creations through the cross of Christ. We should never lose sight of this goal in prayer.

Read verse 16. Paul gives a conditional promise of blessing of peace and mercy. It’s not for everyone, but only for those who “follow this rule”—the rule not of circumcision but of the new creation. When we’re new creations, when our fellowship values being new creations through the cross of Christ, not following rules, laws or customs, we experience true peace and mercy. It’s the mark of the Israel of God, meaning God’s true people who struggle with God through faith in Christ until they’re really changed. Only changed people can really experience God’s peace and God’s mercy.

Read verse 17. Evidently, not just the Judaizers but even some others were out to cause trouble for Paul. They would cause him trouble especially by emphasizing things other than the cross of Christ and the changing power of the Holy Spirit. Since Paul had already experienced so much suffering for Jesus, evidenced by the scars on his body, they should stop.

Read verse 18. Here Paul again comes back to what his letter to the Galatians is all about: living in the grace of Christ (1:6). What we need most, each and every day, is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to be with our spirit.

Today we thought about how important our motives are, and especially, how we can be changed into new creations through the cross of Christ. May God bless us to follow this rule of the new creation. May he fill us with his peace and mercy through the grace of Christ. And may he help us, like Paul, to be changed so deeply that we boast only in the cross of Christ.