

A Final Gospel Appeal Part 3

TEXT: GALATIANS 6:11-18

April 30, 2012

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

In 6:11-18, Paul concludes with one final gospel appeal. In his appeal, he reiterates 5 main themes that he wishes to impress on the minds of the Galatians so that the gospel remains central and sufficient in their lives and churches.

- I. PAUL REITERATES HIS AUTHENTICITY AND AUTHORITY AS AN APOSTLE. vv. 11, 17
- II. PAUL REITERATES THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE CROSS FOR SALVATION. vv. 12-14

LESSON:

- III. PAUL REITERATES THE NECESSITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S WORK IN APPLYING SALVATION. v. 15

Paul writes, "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation."

One final time, Paul emphasizes the central role the Holy Spirit plays in salvation. The Holy Spirit's work, as we will see, points to the centrality and sufficiency of Christ and the gospel, which is the ministry of the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Cor. 3:8).

The cross severed Paul's love affair with the world (cf. v. 14, i.e., boasting in works of the law/circumcision). Because of the cross of Christ, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything as a means of salvation. Though Paul had reason for putting confidence in the flesh, whatever "gain" he had, he now counted as loss for the sake of Christ (Philip. 3:4, 7). Once he came, by grace, to receive and rest in a cursed and crucified Messiah, Paul no longer boasted in his Jewish "pedigree." He learned that a righteousness of his own that came from the law was not only irrelevant but also deadly (cf. 1:8-9)!

In contrast, the Judaizers—and perhaps some of the Galatians who received circumcision—boasted in circumcision, which served as their basis of confidence/standing before God. The Judaizers were still attached to the old age (i.e., the shadows of the law; Col. 2:17; Heb. 8:5; 10:1). They failed to realize how the watershed event of human history—the cross of Christ—inaugurated a new age (cf. 1:4; also add the resurrection, 1:1). John Calvin writes, "The truth of the gospel swallows up, and brings to nought, all the shadows of the law" (*Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 185). Concerning the Judaizers, Michael Horton writes,

“The carriers of the legalistic virus in Galatia and elsewhere were not faulted for having a positive view of the law, but for failing to recognize that its purpose was to lead God’s people to Christ” (*God of Promise*, p. 75). The Judaizers desired to establish their own righteousness (i.e., justification by addition) instead of receiving the righteousness that comes through faith in a cursed and crucified Messiah alone (cf. Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 380).

On the other hand, Paul also says uncircumcision counts for nothing. The Galatians who didn’t receive circumcision could easily base their confidence before God on what they didn’t do (i.e., justification by abstinence). The problem, then, with both circumcision and uncircumcision is simply this: *boasting and trusting in human works rather than Christ’s works alone (i.e., self-justification)*. Self-confidence, self-righteousness and self-justification will always be the natural tendency of man’s fallen heart (even after conversion!).

Paul, however, states, that neither circumcision (i.e., justification by addition) nor uncircumcision (i.e., justification by abstinence) counts before God as the basis for justification. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision can improve the believer’s standing before God. And, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision can save an unbeliever. The reason is because neither has anything to do with salvation!

Paul has already made a similar statement in 5:6 where he writes, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.” Simply put what counts—a life that pleases God—is a life characterized by love for God and others (cf. Gal. 5:13-14; 6:2). Such a loving life is the fruit of true, justifying faith rather than circumcision or uncircumcision (i.e., human works).

Now in 6:15, Paul shows that the life of faith, which pleases God, is the result of the new creation. So, what really counts is a new creation (i.e., the circumcision of the heart, cf. Rom. 2:28-29 rather than of the flesh). No longer commanded to circumcise one’s own heart (Deut. 10:16), the Lord, Himself, will circumcise the hearts of His people (Deut. 30:6; Col. 2:11). True circumcision, then, is a matter of the heart rather than the flesh. For example, Paul writes in Romans 2:28-29, “²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.” In Philippians 3:3, Paul writes, “For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh...” Physical circumcision does not and cannot transform anyone. This new creation—circumcision of the heart—is the result of the Holy Spirit’s work, as promised by the prophets (cf. Jer. 31:31-37; Ezek. 36:26-27).

What is the “new creation” of which Paul speaks? The phrase “new creation” refers to the doctrine of regeneration, which is the Spirit’s sovereign, gracious work of raising those who are spiritually dead to life.

This new creation includes everything that has been given in and through Christ—the new reality of the Kingdom of God (Ridderbos, *Galatians*, p. 226). “All that Christ has won for us, outside of us in history,” writes, Michael Horton, “is given to us when the Holy Spirit unites us to Him through faith” (Horton, *For Calvinism*, p. 101). This new creation yields the treasures of our union with Christ: justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification (Ibid, p. 101).

Paul opens this letter by stating how Christ’s death inaugurates this new creation (i.e., Christ delivers us from this present evil age by His death, 1:4). And, Paul closes this letter by stating how the Holy Spirit applies this new creation to the hearts of believers. However, this “new creation” is not only restricted to the hearts of believers. Michael Horton explains, “One day it will encompass our bodies—and not only human beings, but the whole creation in all of its breadth and diversity” (*For Calvinism*, p. 101). This new creation, which has already begun, will one day be consummated when Christ returns (Rom. 8:18-22). The gospel has not only personal but also cosmic implications!

Even now, believers are *already* members of the new age, which has penetrated this evil age (we are already delivered from this present evil age, 1:4!). This new creation and the presence of the Spirit are down payments/guarantees of the consummation of the new age to come. The Holy Spirit is now at work making all things new from the inside out, creating faith in the hearts of His people (cf. Horton, *For Calvinism*, pp. 101-102).

In addition to all of this, this new creation is the source of membership in the covenant people of God/Kingdom of God. Since a new creation is what counts because it alone is the source of covenant membership, how does this new creation come about?

To begin with, regeneration is not dependent on works of the law (i.e., circumcision/uncircumcision), human decision and effort. “Regeneration...is something that happens to those who do not have the moral capacity to convert themselves...” (Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith*, p. 574). Like faith and its fruits, this new creation cannot be attributed to works of the law. Faith (2:16), the cross of Christ (6:14) and regeneration (6:15) completely strip away all merit and ability of man and thrust him wholly upon the person and work of Christ alone for salvation.

Faith, as we have learned, is a self-emptying grace. Faith stands over against all our efforts at becoming right with God (2:16). Genuine justifying faith renounces all confidence in one’s own merits and attempts to please God (i.e., baptism, confirmation, spiritual disciplines, church attendance, philanthropy, etc...). Genuine faith receives and rests solely in the person and merits of Christ alone for one’s standing before God.

Trusting in the cross of Christ also humbles us. The cross of Christ stands as an eternal reminder that we can only be justified before God on the basis of Christ's works rather than anything we have done. The following line in the hymn *Rock of Ages* captures this thought, "Nothing in my hand I bring simply to the cross I cling." Becoming a new creation also humbles us because we can no more bring ourselves to life than we can justify ourselves or produce the fruit of the Spirit. All of these things are dependent upon the gracious work of the Holy Spirit.

Because our works always fall short of the Law's requirements, we come under the Law's curse. Michael Horton writes, "...circumcision (when treated as a necessary rite for covenant membership) places one within the sphere of law, which because of sin leads only to the curse, while faith in Christ places one within the sphere of the covenant of grace that God made with Abraham. Circumcision counts for nothing: everything turns on faith in Christ, announced by the gospel (Ro 2:17-29)" (*The Christian Faith*, p. 733).

External laws may restrain but they cannot raise the dead and grant life. Here in v. 15, Paul is emphasizing the life-giving Spirit and gospel in contrast to the inability and powerlessness of the works of the law. In Galatians 3:21, Paul has already shown the law's inability to grant life (righteousness). He writes, "...For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law." The law, however, is not—and was never intended to be—a source of life and right standing with God.

The law and gospel both have a place in God's economy but they function differently. The law was instituted in order to kill (i.e., to convict man of his sin in order to drive him to Christ, cf. 3:24. Note: Admittedly, conviction of sin is not the law's only function; cf. Gal. 5:13-6:10. Clearly, Paul reveals how the gospel and life in the Spirit doesn't lead to antinomianism. Ironically, it is the covenantal nomist/legalist who dismisses God's law and is the consummate antinomian, cf. Gal. 2:17-21; Gal. 5:13-6:10).

In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul compares and contrasts the old covenant (Mosaic Law) with the new covenant. In v. 6, he writes, "For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." The old covenant kills because it commands people how to live but it doesn't provide the power to keep what it commands. This was never its intention! Therefore, the Mosaic Law brought people under God's judgment as covenant breakers (Gal. 3:10; Deut. 27:26).

In contrast to Paul, Judaism viewed the law as the pathway to life (cf. Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 244). The Judaizers, by virtue of their circumcision, believed they had kept God's law. They were confident of their standing/righteousness/life before God and within the law because of their circumcision. But, Paul says they have not in fact kept the Law (6:13).

Over against circumcision, Paul says the Spirit alone gives life and empowers a man to keep the law (cf. Rom. 8:3-4). Only the Holy Spirit can bring about a new creation and thereby enable God's people to keep God's commands. In Ezekiel 36:26-27, Ezekiel promised this gracious work of the Spirit when he prophesied concerning the new covenant, "²⁶ ...I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

When Christ comes to us in the power of His Word and Spirit, He does not come to improve us, to assist us or to motivate us to be all we can be (see Michael Horton, "The Narrow Gate," April 22, 2012 WHI Commentary). Rather, He comes to kill us (by His word of law) and to make us alive (by His word of gospel).

Through the announcement of the gospel, the Holy Spirit raises those who are spiritually dead to life—He turns a sinner into a new creation. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul writes, "...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." Only the Holy Spirit can bring about this new creation.

Throughout Galatians, Paul has discussed the vital role the Holy Spirit plays in salvation and the Christian life (cf. 3:15, 14; 4:6; 5:5, 13-24; 5:25-6:10; 6:15). For example, in 3:2, Paul asks the Galatians, "Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?" What is it that the Galatians heard? They heard the proclamation of Christ crucified—the gospel (3:1). Even though the work of the Spirit in regeneration is a mystery (John 3:8), the Spirit doesn't ordinarily exclude or overthrow the use of means—specifically the gospel (see *Canons of Dort*, Third and Fourth Heads of doctrine, section 17). In His wisdom, God has ordained for the gospel to be the "seed of regeneration and food of the soul" (cf. *Ibid*).

Article 24 in the Belgic Confession states, "We believe that this true faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a new man, causing him to live a new life and freeing him from the bondage of sin."

Peter, in 1 Peter 1:23, 25, says, "²³ ...you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God...²⁵ *And this word is the good news that was preached to you*" (emphasis mine, cf. James 1:18). Jesus, in John 6:63, says, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life." The Holy Spirit works powerfully in and through the words that Jesus speaks. His words are "spirit and life."

In John 7:38, Jesus promises, "Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of His heart will flow rivers of living water.'" Often this verse is misapplied to believers but this verse is actually speaking of Christ. The context of John 7 is the

Feast of Tabernacles, which recalled the time of Israel's wilderness wanderings. Jesus announces—quite an announcement!—that He is the fulfillment of the rock that gave water to the thirsty Israelites (cf. Ex. 17; cf. 1 Cor. 10:4). So, it is from Jesus' heart that rivers of living water flow to all who trust in Him alone for salvation. The rivers of living water, John says, is the life-giving Spirit, "Now this He said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive..." (Jn. 7:39).

The gospel is God's life-giving word, creating a new world out of nothing (Rom. 4:16-17; 1 Pet. 1:23, 25; cf. Horton, *For Calvinism*, p. 102). But, it is a powerful, life-giving-creating word only in concert with the working of the Holy Spirit. John Calvin writes, "...the whole excellence of the gospel depends on this, that it is made life-giving to us by the grace of the Holy Spirit" (*Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 20, p. 187).

When announced, the Holy Spirit takes gospel and brings about a new creation. The Holy Spirit opens our blind eyes and enlightens our darkened minds and makes us capable of receiving and understanding the gospel. In 2 Corinthians 4:6, Paul writes, "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Commenting this verse, John Calvin writes,

For as God, the Creator of the world, pours forth upon us the brightness of the sun, and gives us eyes to receive it, so, as the Redeemer, in the person of His Son, He shines forth, indeed, upon us by His gospel, but, as we are blind, that would be in vain, if He did not at the same time enlighten our understandings by His Spirit. His meaning, therefore, is, that God has, by His Spirit, opened the eyes of our understandings, so as to make them capable of receiving the light of the gospel (*Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 20, p. 200).

As Paul concludes his letter, he reminds the Galatians one final time that what counts is life by and in the Spirit rather than trying to find life in external forms and legal observance, which are powerless and of no saving profit. Only the Holy Spirit has the ability to sever our insatiable desire for self-justification and grant us life and faith to receive and rest in Christ alone for salvation. The Holy Spirit brings us to Christ and joins us to Him—He is the bond, who unites us to Christ. For as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from Him, all that He has suffered and done for our salvation remains useless and of no value for us (Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.). We come then to receive and enjoy Christ and all His saving benefits, by the secret energy of the Holy Spirit (Ibid, 3.1.1.).

In John 15:26, Jesus says concerning the Spirit's work, "When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me." There is no disconnecting of the Holy Spirit from the person and work of Jesus. The Spirit has a self-effacing ministry in which He shines like a floodlight on the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 14) showing Him and His work to be totally sufficient for salvation. What really counts

then is the Holy Spirit working through the gospel to raise the dead and apply the saving benefits of Christ's finished work in us.

REFLECTION:

In Paul's final appeal, he is bringing into clear focus the governing principle of salvation in all of its aspects, namely the grace of God over against the works of the law. The specific sin of the Judaizers was self-righteousness, self-justification (boasting in circumcision). For the Judaizers and bewitched Galatians, "Circumcision was a disguise before men, but regeneration is a truth before God" (John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 186).

While boasting in circumcision or uncircumcision is no longer a problem in the church today, the underlying problem still exists and flourishes, namely self-justification. Self-justification continually rears its ugly head in a thousand different ways. The fallen heart of man continues today to set up "disguises." For example, some teach baptismal regeneration and believe that because they are baptized they are saved. Baptism does not save. Only a cursed and crucified and risen Messiah saves! Baptism, like circumcision, is simply a sign and seal of the righteousness one has by faith (Rom. 4:11). Baptism does not work in itself to effect regeneration. A new creation is a work of the Holy Spirit who raises those who are spiritually dead through the announcement of the gospel!

By emphasizing the necessity of the new creation, Paul is teaching that salvation is all of grace in both its accomplishment and application. Such an emphasis upon the grace of God destroys any notion of self-righteousness and law-keeping (i.e., covenantal nomism) as necessary for justification.

In John 3:3, 5, Jesus told Nicodemus that unless a man is born from above he cannot see or enter the Kingdom of God. In similar fashion, Paul states that unless a man becomes a new creation he cannot belong to the people of God. Covenant membership in the people of God is not a matter of circumcision or uncircumcision (i.e., self-effort, self-justification). We do not work or earn our way into the kingdom of God. Rather, a man becomes a part of the people of God (enters the Kingdom of God) by the grace of regeneration alone. The Holy Spirit is the source of the new creation.

The question then becomes, "If a new creation is what counts but is beyond our effort, how is the new creation possible?" "How can a person who is dead in trespasses and sins, whose mind is at enmity against God and unable to do anything that is well-pleasing to God become a new creation?" The answer is found in the good news that Jesus taught His disciples, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (cf. Matt. 19:26).

Unlike the Mosaic Covenant, which commands but doesn't give, God the Holy Spirit, in the new covenant, gives what is required! It is the glory of the gospel of God's

grace (new covenant) that it provides for this impossibility. John Murray writes, “It is when we take into account God’s recreative power and grace that the contradiction between the call of God and the sinful condition of the called is resolved” (John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, p. 96).

The announcement of the gospel carries with it the living, active energy of the Holy Spirit so that the person who is called is graciously enabled to answer the call and thereby receive and rest in Jesus Christ as He is freely offered in the gospel (cf. Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith*, p. 574).

God’s grace reaches down to the lowest depths of our need. His grace overcomes our dead, depraved hearts and our moral and spiritual inability (cf. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, p. 96). The gospel is the power of God for salvation (cf. Rom. 1:16). This is the grace of regeneration—a new creation.

Through the gospel, the Holy Spirit effects this radical and all-pervasive change, which Paul calls a new creation. Thus, in the matter of salvation, the only thing that matters is whether this radical change has taken place. It doesn’t matter if you are a circumcised Jew or Gentile or an uncircumcised Jew or Gentile. All that matters is whether you have become a new creation in Christ.

If you have not experienced this new birth, cry out to God for it. Jesus invites and promises, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Even though regeneration is something God alone can give, Jesus assures us that He will save all who come to Him in faith. In fact, coming to Jesus, receiving and resting in Him alone for salvation is the surest evidence that you are a new creation.

So, we come to Jesus to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves (i.e., circumcision or uncircumcision). If you come, He will receive you. Jesus has promised, “Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of His heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

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