

WORKING FOR THE GOOD OF ALL!

Hearing the Word

Reader: “Today as we conclude the eight sessions of our study, we will also hear the conclusion of Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia. Although he has been intense in the letter, he now seeks peace in the community. Along with words of encouragement for good behavior, the apostle concludes with confidence in God’s new creation.

“The following insights are again offered to help you focus your listening for God’s word.”

Insights Summaries

1. *Listen for the divine importance of the work of believers.* God’s mercy in Jesus Christ justifies us, and therefore God puts us to work so that our lives hold promise for our neighbors and the world. What are your opportunities “to work for the good of all,” as Paul says, “and especially for those of the family of faith”?
2. *Listen for his encouragement of “a spirit of gentleness,”* and remember that your only boast is in the cross of Christ, where God’s great love was sealed for you and your neighbor. What will “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” mean to the spirit of your community?

Reader: “A reading of the sixth chapter of Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia. May the Word of God dwell in you richly.”

Galatians 6:1-18

6 My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.^a Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. ² Bear one another’s burdens,^b and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³ For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.

⁴ All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor’s work, will become a cause for pride. ⁵ For all must carry their own loads.

⁶ Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.^c

⁷ Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. ⁸ If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. ⁹ So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.

¹⁰ So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.^d

¹¹ See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!

¹² It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.^e ¹³ Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh.

¹⁴ May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Galatians

6:1-18

Reader’s Notes

¹⁵ For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!^f

¹⁶ As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. ¹⁷ From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.

¹⁸ May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen^g.

Reader: “This is the Word of the Lord.”

Community: “Thanks be to God!”

Pause for Contemplation

Reader: “What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?”

Allow time for sharing thoughts and listening for the Spirit in the witness of the community. After a few minutes, the leader of the study will then introduce the topic for the day.

Information Notes

- ^a When a Christian community has experienced deep disruptions, those who have formal or spiritual leadership roles must pay particular attention to restoring those who have been wounded or confronted. Restoration and reconciliation, not reprisals, must be the goals. This is also the work of the Spirit.
- ^b Paul’s emphasis on mutual care expresses his awareness that at various times every person can be dealing with burdens too heavy to bear. Bearing burdens is what servants and slaves do, and the followers of Jesus know they are not above having such difficulties or doing such work for others (see verses 3-5).
- ^c This is a traditional encouragement for rewarding teachers, perhaps now putting Paul back into that role.
- ^d In verses 7-10 Paul returns to his main testimony to God’s presence and agency in the community. A Christian community must remember that God is among them as they deal with their conflicts. Mere power politics, in the church or anywhere else, are seeds sown according to the flesh, as if there were no God. Sowing “to the Spirit” is dealing with one another as those for whom Christ died, confident that the One who began a good work in them “will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (see Phil. 1:6). Even in our conflicts, especially then, we regard one another in the family of faith with holy awe.^e
- ^e This is the only clue Paul gives us that the Jewish Christians who are insisting on circumcision may be facing persecution, if they are not strict on this question. Paul who had been a persecutor of the followers of Jesus could understand their plight, even if he disagreed forcefully with them.
- ^f Paul does not make an issue out of circumcision, but he refuses to let his adversaries make it essential. He rose up with fierce objections because they were making a requirement out of something that was no longer the basis of God’s covenant or bond with God’s people. The “new creation” God established in Jesus put everything on a new basis. Going back to cover ourselves by keeping the old rules endangers our trust in the promise for ourselves and for our callings in the world.
- ^g Although Paul neglected his usual thanksgiving for the Galatians at the beginning of his letter, he still began and ended with an apostolic blessing (see also 1:3-5). His hard work in this letter receives its authority from his confidence in God’s blessing for them and for him.

Insights for Readers and Leaders

1. Listen for the divine importance of the work of believers.

It has been said that the pillars of the Lutheran Reformation were the teaching of God’s justification of sinners, and the priesthood of believers. Galatians is about both, as Luther showed in his lectures on Galatians and his treatise on the “The Freedom of the Christian.” Galatians demonstrates these teachings were more than corrections of the abuses of the medieval church. They are the living witness to the gospel.

Galatians never uses a term like “the priesthood of believers.” Paul was not contending with a churchly hierarchy, and apparently the church didn’t even have priests. But the priesthood is not the focus anyway. What matters is the discovery that all of God’s people have vocations, callings in the world. The promise of the gospel is that all forgiven sinners become agents of God’s mercy and justice in the world. The Holy Spirit dwells in the believers so that the faithfulness of Christ is at work in their faithful lives. Christians bear Christ to their neighbors in every conceivable situation, just as Jesus dealt with everyone where they were. Christians cannot wait for themselves to be fully formed in Christ to be ready for these callings, and they surely cannot wait until they find people who are worthy of Christ. No one is.

Sometimes it is most trying to bear Christ or even just to be a Christian in our own families. Sometimes the opportunities arise at work, in our public lives, and even in our communities of faith. Having a calling is having a commission into the world God loves. God’s mercy in Jesus Christ justifies us, and God puts us to work for the blessing and benefit of our neighbors and the world. Your vocations or callings lie in the opportunities God gives you “to work for the good of all,” as Paul says, “and especially for those of the family of faith.” Christ did not promise it would be easy.

2. Listen for his encouragement of “a spirit of gentleness.”

As the Study of Human Sexuality has indicated clearly, the world has often turned human sexuality from its created promise of freedom and life into an entrapment in bondage and death. Christians have often withdrawn in disapproval instead of engaging the common quest for what sexual understandings and behaviors will truly benefit the world. The love of God in Christ Jesus is not a sentimental acceptance of everything that happens, but it is a commission to meet people in their greatest need, a call to abandon the ways of death, and a promise of the enduring presence of Christ as his disciples learn to be formed in his Spirit and conformed to him. As it turns out, “working for the good of all and especially for the family of faith” (Gal. 6:10) is the challenging work of discipleship. Discipleship means learning with the Holy Spirit and the risen Christ. Then the “gentleness” for transgressors is human kindness, but more, it is bearing the compassion of Christ, perhaps including the apostle’s marks of suffering.

Galatians 5 and 6 are not only the practical or moral sections of the letter. These chapters are the conclusion for which the apostle was heading. “For Freedom Christ has Set us Free!” is the joyful declaration of forgiven sinners who are now empowered to become servants of their neighbors, especially the most vulnerable, and the world that has forgotten God.