

## It's Great to be Alive!

Three times I have visited the Academia museum in Florence to see Michelangelo's sculpture of David. The first two times, I was especially captured by the face of David, as I gazed upon it from his left, as if he were looking toward me.

Michelangelo captures David at the moment he decided to fight Goliath. One look at his face shows that he has much on his mind.

What's he feeling? Among other emotions, he's feeling confident. We know that such was the case historically: David believed he would defeat Goliath.

As you look out on the world, what are you seeing and hearing and feeling?

Today, in our study of Galatians, we make an end.

### Large letters

#### **Galatians 6:11-12:**

**See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. <sup>12</sup> 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.**

It was common in Paul's day for a letter writer to dictate words to a secretary and then to add his signature and perhaps a few closing words to attest to the contents of the letter. We know from some of his other letters that Paul practiced this (1 Corinthians 16:21, Colossians 4:18, 2 Thessalonians 3:17). It is unclear from verse 11 whether Paul used a secretary with this letter or not.

In any case, we know that at least in verse 11, he's not using a secretary. Galatians is the only letter in which he calls attention to his "large letters," emphasizing the importance of his words.

The rival teachers, Jews who came to Galatia from Jerusalem, "want to make a good showing in the flesh," saving face before both Jews and Gentiles and avoiding persecution from both. They do this by foisting the Jewish rite of circumcision on Gentile believers in Christ.

Paul himself, as a Jew, once persecuted Jews who came to faith in Christ, so he knows whereof he speaks. If these Gentiles become as Jewish as possible by submitting to circumcision, some Jews might be satisfied. Circumcised Gentiles might be satisfied as well, because Jews enjoyed some protections under Roman rule and could abstain from expected pagan practices.

Whereas Paul was concerned about the Spirit's work in the hearts of people, the rival teachers were concerned about external marks on people as a sort of personal trophy (Galatians 4:19).

### **What do we care about (part one)?**

Those who advocate cultural conversion and cultural conformity emphasize externals: how things appear on the outside. With such an emphasis, they leave the heart untouched. Or, even worse, they crush the heart. They deemphasize internals: how things are on the inside. On the inside, the Spirit wants to work in the deepest regions of the human heart. The Spirit wants to renew our hearts, not our appearance.

What do we care about, making a “good showing” or, as Paul puts it in Galatians 6:9, “doing good”? If we care about making a good showing, the focus is on ourselves, and we’ll make ourselves slaves to what people think of us. If we care about doing good, the focus is on others, and we’ll be free of what people think of us.

The preschool co-op that Karen and I were involved in invited Fred Luskin, an expert in the field of forgiveness, to speak. I don’t remember what he lectured on. I just remember this:

“I’m considered one of top two or three experts in my field. I’m at the top of the food chain. Do you know what it counts for? It counts for [nothing]. What counts is being a good person.” He didn’t use the word “nothing,” but it will suffice for use in a sermon.

In a room full of high-achieving Silicon Valley parents, some of whom no doubt hoped to rear high-achieving children, I’m sure not a few were taken aback.

The rival teachers are zealous for the law, then, right? Not so much.

## **The place of boasting**

### **Galatians 6:13-14:**

**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. <sup>14</sup> 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.**

Circumcision was called for in the Mosaic Law, but now Paul shows that those who have been beating the drum for the law in Galatia don’t care to keep it themselves. What they care about is getting Gentile believers in Christ circumcised. They care about checking a box. If they check the box, they can “boast,” saving face and avoiding persecution.

Paul, by contrast, abhors that kind of boasting. There is a kind of boasting he values, however. While the rival teachers seek to avoid being persecuted for the cross, Paul boasts, or revels, in “the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” and is thus willing to suffer persecution for it.

Jesus, the Jewish Christ, or king, is Lord of the world. Caesar, the Roman lord, exerted his power by crucifying those who took issue with his rule, exposing them to shame. Christ, on the other hand, became Lord of the world by submitting to Roman crucifixion and triumphing over Caesar, and all rival rulers, by rising from the dead, showing them in the end to be powerless before him.

For Paul, the crucifixion of Christ defeated the world—that is, the rulers and values opposed to the rule and values of God. Earlier in his life, he subscribed to the values of the

world, in some ways unwittingly. But when he gave his allegiance to Christ, he was crucified with Christ: the world lost its grip on him, and he lost his grip on the world.

The crucifixion of Christ was so epochal that Paul can even say that “the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world”—or, as Paul put it earlier, “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24).

### **What do we care about (part two)?**

What do we care about, having something to boast about or the cross of Jesus Christ? If we care about having something to boast about, we’ll shun the cross, which relativizes boasting. If we care about the cross, we’ll shun boasting, which relativizes the cross. If we care about having something to boast about, we’ll make ourselves slaves to pride. If we care about the cross, the cross will liberate us from pride.

Brennan Manning quotes an acquaintance: “I can’t stand the cross. It is a denial of all that I value in life. I am a proud man, sensual; I seek pleasure. The cross reproaches me. It says, ‘You’re wrong. Your life must take this shape. This is the only true interpretation of life, and life is true only when it takes this form.’”<sup>1</sup>

There’s a man who dismisses the cross because he favors pride.

What then matters?

### **What counts**

#### **Galatians 6:15:**

**For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.**

Paul repeats almost word for word what he said in Galatians 5:6 concerning the irrelevance both of circumcision and uncircumcision. Circumcision—being a Jew—doesn’t count for anything. Likewise, uncircumcision—being a Gentile—doesn’t count for anything. Spiritually, ethnicity and culture count for nothing—unless you make them count for something; then they count for something: they count against allegiance to Christ.

In Galatians 5:6, Paul countered that what counts is “faith”—that is, allegiance to Christ —“working through love.” Now he says that what also counts, as opposed to circumcision or uncircumcision, is “new creation.”

Earlier, Paul said that Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us “from the present evil age” (Galatians 1:4). Christ inaugurated the new age. New age also means new creation. The new creation—that is, the new heavens and the new earth—has in a sense already begun with the resurrection of Christ and the spiritual resurrection of all his followers.

Each person who has given his or her allegiance to Christ has died to the flesh and to the world has been raised to life as a new creation by the Holy Spirit. The people of God together are also a new creation. Both new-creation individuals and the new-creation people of God foreshadow the new-creation heavens and earth (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Spirit, in the present, is

the guarantee, or down payment, of our “inheritance,” which is the new heavens and new earth (Ephesians 1:14).

If you make circumcision or uncircumcision—if you make ethnicity or culture—count for something, you’re reverting to the old age and the old creation.

## **Blown away**

If you have given your allegiance to Christ, then the Holy Spirit has re-created you. You are a new creation. You are also part of the church of Jesus Christ, which is also a new creation. Moreover, you will inherit the new creation, which has already broken into this world.

John’s account of the resurrection in John 20 is bursting with new-creation imagery. The garden where Jesus was buried is akin to the garden of Eden. Jesus was the first one placed in a new tomb there, just like Adam was the first one placed in the garden of Eden. When Mary Magdalene came to the tomb on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, it is the dawning of a new creation.

Forget about making a good showing. Forget about boasting. They count for nothing. What counts? New creation. It counts for everything, literally, because in the end, it will be everything.

When I came to Christ at the age of sixteen, I felt as if I had discovered a new world, right where I was living. Now I know that’s what happened. I discovered the new creation, which had already broken into this world with the coming of Christ and the Spirit. In fact, I became a new creation.

I began seeing and hearing and feeling all sorts of things that were new to me. It was a world that I didn’t know existed. But once I became a new creation, I began experiencing it. I was blown away.

How then should we live?

## **This rule**

### **Galatians 6:16:**

**And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.**

Who are those who “walk by this rule,” and what is “this rule”? Grammatically, those who walk by this rule stand in contrast to “those who want to make a good showing in the flesh” by forcing circumcision on believers in Christ. The “rule,” then, concerns the irrelevance of circumcision on the one hand and the importance of new creation on the other hand.

The verb translated “walk” is translated “keep in step” in Galatians 5:25. There, Paul urges us to walk by, or keep in step with, the Spirit. Walking by this rule, then, has to do with keeping in step with the Spirit, not the flesh. Keep in step with the Spirit, which is in keeping with the new creation, not with the flesh, which is in keeping with the old creation.

Paul bids peace and mercy to those who “walk by this rule,” whom he further defines as “the Israel of God.” The word translated “and” can also be translated “even,” and should be in this case: “even upon the Israel of God.”

As Paul says elsewhere, Gentiles were at one point “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel” but are no longer, for in Christ they are now “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:11-18). Indeed, Paul has gone to great lengths in Galatians to demonstrate that Jews and Gentiles in Christ are one people. As he says elsewhere, Gentiles have been “grafted” into Israel, the Israel of God (Romans 11:17). Jew and Gentile believers in Christ, not ethnic Israel, are “a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Today, there is another Israel, in the Middle East, but that is not the Israel of God. Jews and Gentiles who believe in Christ constitute the Israel of God. There is no other.

### **Walk as new-creation people**

Walk by this rule: Making a good showing counts for nothing. Having something to boast about counts for nothing. New creation counts for everything. Walk not as old-creation people but as new-creation people.

Today, I remain blown away by the new creation. In fact, I’m more blown away.

There is much in this world to be discouraged about. However, we also live in a different world, a heavenly and eternal world, which has broken into this world. As Paul puts it elsewhere, “our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20). The Holy Spirit, who breathed out the Scriptures, helps us understand this by illuminating Scriptures as we read and study them.

I see the beauty of the pearl of great price, shimmering for those in search of true riches. I hear the music of the trumpet of the angels, sounding for the dead that rise. And I feel the power of the love of God in my heart, where his Spirit is crying, “Abba! Father!”

Every once in a while, you have to say to yourself, sometimes in defiance of the difficulty of the days, “It’s great to be alive!” And know this: No matter how difficult the days, if you’ve given your life to Christ, every day you’re getting closer to being more alive than you’ve ever been. And if you do not yet know Jesus, give your allegiance to him, and you will come alive in the most important sense possible.

### **Into the future**

In September, I visited the Academia in Florence for the third time, this time with my family. I was taken by the face of David again, but I spent most of my time behind him and to his right, looking with him, over his shoulder as it were, out into the future. He knows Goliath is out there, waiting for him, but he’s confident.

As I looked out into the future, I felt confidence. The world is a wreck, filled with all manner of giants. But another world has broken into this world, and with Michelangelo’s help, and the Spirit’s help, I was able to see it. Indeed, I live in it!

Paul makes an end.

### **The marks of Jesus**

## **Galatians 6:17-18:**

**From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.  
18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.**

Jews who are foisting circumcision on the Galatians have not only been troubling the Galatians, they have also been troubling Paul, seeking to discredit both him and the gospel he preaches. Paul has reached the point in the letter where he is satisfied that he has sufficiently countered them and their false teaching.

He now, especially for the sake of the Galatians, sees no reason why anyone should cause him trouble any longer. Of course, the trouble that anyone causes Paul reverberates to the Galatians if they believe the troublemakers.

If the troublemakers are advocating that the Galatians get circumcised, scarring their bodies and supposedly marking themselves out as the people of God, Paul has scars on his body also: “the marks of Jesus” from when he was beaten for the gospel (Acts 14:19-20, 2 Corinthians 11:24).

Like a slave, who would be identified by branding, Paul identifies himself in closing as he identifies himself in some introductions: as a slave of Christ Jesus (Romans 1:1, Philippians 1:1, Titus 1:1).

Paul opened his letter by bidding the Galatians “grace”—that is, the grace of God that is available in the gospel. He closes in the same manner, this time asking for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to be “with your spirit”—that is with your whole person, which is indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit, who cries out within them—and us—“Abba! Father!

Leta Sundet, an English professor, writes: “Grace does not need our permission to go to work on us. In God’s economy, grace is stubborn, relentless, and inescapable; it hounds; it gets inside without permission; it rises like a wave.” [Leta Sundet, “The Artistry of Grace” (Touchstone, November/December 2015).]

In our study of Galatians, have I sufficiently countered the false teaching of cultural conversion and cultural conformity? I hope so.

Now I will make an end.

## **Caught by surprise**

The gospel of Jesus Christ not only saves us as individuals, it also incorporates us into a family: the family of God. We, as believers in Jesus Christ, constitute one family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ.

Galatians 3:28 again: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

The gospel brings us into the family of God and keeps us together in the family of God. The unification of different ethnicities in Christ is not an optional add-on to the gospel; it is at the very heart of the gospel, “for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

The opportunity to study and preach Galatians this year caught me by surprise. I wasn't expecting it. Galatians has been a gift to me. I hope it has been a gift to you. God does crazy beautiful stuff.

I leave you not with a verse from Galatians but with a verse from Malachi, the final book of the Hebrew Scriptures, which captures the ethos of Galatians: "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall" (Galatians 4:2).

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus on the Pages of Our Lives* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1992), 33.