

Galatians:

Paul's Timeless Message of Grace Over Legalism

*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.
The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God,
who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God,
for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"*
Galatians 2:20,21

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Galatians

Paul's Timeless Message of Grace Over Legalism

The format of this study will be to intersperse the study notes with the discussion questions. The primary resource as always is the Bible. Other resources used to prepare these notes include "The Concordia Study Bible;" Professor John P. Koehler's 1909 commentary, "The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians;" Professor Armin Panning's "People's Bible on Galatians and Ephesians;" Prof. Paul O. Wendland's class lecture notes; and Pastor Robert Johannes's Bible study question sheets on Galatians. These works are thorough and will be consulted extensively for this entire set of study notes.

Introduction Paul's letter to the congregations of Galatia

To whom the letter is written:

In verse 2 the author states clearly, "To the churches in Galatia..." While this would seem to be self-evident, there are two main theories of where that was. There was a group of people who were referred to as Galatians who lived in the northern part of the province of Galatia. They were descended from the Gauls who came from the area of the world we know as France. The problem is there were no major cities in that area in addition to the fact that there is no evidence that Paul ever did any mission work there.

The second theory, favored by all of the commentaries noted earlier, is that Paul is writing to those churches he established in the southern part of the province of Galatia.

1. When did Paul visit southern Galatia and what congregations did he establish there?
(Where will you look for that information?)

2. What do we know about Paul's modus operandi, i.e. where did he usually begin his work in any given area?

3. To what people is he therefore specifically writing this epistle? So what?? What does that mean to us?

The author:

Verse 1 of chapter 1 answers the question clearly. The author is the apostle Paul.

4. How do you explain chapter 6:11?

5. Noting that most of Paul's other epistles include greetings to and from other Christians, what do we make of the fact that no such greetings are included in the letter to the Galatians?

Date of writing:

Because there are no greetings from people like Silas or Timothy, it is thought that Paul was alone when he wrote this letter. From Galatians 4:13 it's pretty obvious that Paul had visited them previously. Because we know the dates of his visits to the province of Galatia we conclude

that he wrote this letter about 52 A.D. This is further substantiated by his comment in chapter 1:6.

6. How does 1:6 further substantiate the date of writing?

7. From where did Paul probably write this epistle?

Purpose of the letter:

From the letter itself we gather that Judaizers had come from the Jerusalem Christian congregation. They were upset that the Gentiles in Galatia who were now also Christians weren't being asked to follow the Jewish laws. Under the OT provisions for a Gentile to join the Jews in the worship of the LORD following the ceremonial law was required. This included circumcision, among the other festival observances.

Apparently the argument went something along the lines that what Paul said wasn't as valid as what the other apostles said because Paul wasn't one of the leaders of the Christian church. Paul, they argued, was "softening" the requirements to be a Christian because he wanted to be popular among the Gentiles and thereby gather a following. After all, it had always been required to follow the OT law to be a true heir of Abraham and eternal life was their line of reasoning. Just because Jesus had died on the cross and risen from the dead didn't change those requirements did they? Additionally, if no one followed the law, sin would run rampant, wouldn't it?

8. What would you expect to find in Paul's letter to the Galatian congregations?

a.

b.

c.

9. Why would this letter be referred to as, "Luther's book?"

10. Name some occasions when you would want to turn to this letter for reference in today's world and/or in your life.

Read the epistle and fill in the following:

Outline of Paul's Letter to the Galatians:

I.

II.

III.

For next time:

Read the letter a couple of times. Study chapters 1 and 2. Look for answers to the questions:

- How did Paul prove he was worthy as an apostle?
- How did Paul prove that what he said was credible?
- How does this help us in our everyday lives?
- How does this help us in conversations with others?

Also write down any questions you have about the material in chapters 1 and 2.

Galatians 1–2:21

Greetings and Paul’s Defense of his Apostleship

Galatians 1:1-5

Paul follows the custom of the day in his letter to the churches of Galatia. He begins by introducing himself as the author and immediately gets to the purpose of the letter. He describes himself as “an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—...”

1. What is an “apostle”? (Hint: Paul defines the word himself.)

2. What doctrinal truths are included in Paul’s greeting?

The “brothers” are probably those representatives of the Galatian churches who had brought the message to Paul of problems arising in those congregations.

3. Which congregations were included as “the churches in Galatia?”

While “Grace and peace to you...” are part of Paul’s usual greeting, they actually represent a combination of the common Greek greeting, “grace,” and the Jewish greeting “shalom” which means “peace.” Paul was making a point that he was addressing both Jews and Gentiles. He would have been conveying the much richer meaning of both words to his readers as well.

4. What is the full meaning of these words in the context of Paul’s greeting?

Here too, Paul includes the vital description of Jesus’ mission on earth, “who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father”

5. From what have we been rescued and why?

Galatians 1:6-10

If we compare this letter with Paul’s other letters, for instance to the Corinthians, Thessalonians, Ephesians, or Philippians, we notice this letter is missing the prayer or thanksgiving which follows the greeting. Paul is so upset by the false doctrine which has arisen, that he launches right into an emotional attack on that problem. He’s “astonished” that they could “so quickly” desert the gospel that Paul has preached.

6. When is this letter probably being written?

7. When had Paul previously visited these congregations?
8. What specific message would he have brought to them after his last visit?
9. Why was this such a hot topic for the Jews who had become Christian?
10. Paul writes of a “perverted gospel.” What is the perverted Gospel that Paul is speaking of?
11. Why is Paul so excited about it?

12. Explain what Paul is saying in verse 10.

Galatians 1:11-14

Paul now begins the defense of his apostleship with the emphatic statement that the “gospel I preached” was received directly “by revelation from Jesus Christ.” He then describes his life before his conversion.

13. What’s the purpose of Paul describing his life before his conversion?

14. How did he describe himself before his conversion?

Galatians 1:15-17

There is now a description of what changed Paul’s life. He makes it very clear that this was not a willful decision on his part but entirely by the grace of God.

15. List the three ways that Paul states his conversion was by grace alone.

16. How is this encouraging and edifying for us personally?

17. Why would it be helpful to keep this in mind as we reach out to others with the message of Jesus Christ and all that he's done for us?

18. How does Paul further strengthen his argument that his gospel message is directly from Jesus Christ, just like the other apostles?

Galatians 1:18-24

The facts about Paul's development as an apostle are so important he, on oath, declares he's not lying.

19. What's the point of his recounting his trip to Jerusalem?

20. Why does Paul then include the account of his stay in Syria and Cilicia?

21. How did the churches of Judea respond to Paul and the work he'd been called to do?

Galatians 2:1-21

After a 14-year absence, most of it spent in Syria and Cilicia, Paul now returns to Jerusalem with Barnabas. While there is some disagreement as to the counting of the 14 years, Professor Panning sees that trip coinciding with the Council of Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15. Apparently Paul was explaining and/or defending the message he was proclaiming to the Gentiles.

22. What was the big difference between the requirements of proselytes to the OT church and those who were Gentiles joining in the membership of the NT church?

23. What was the Council of Jerusalem all about?

In the next section of verses, 6-10, Paul indicates that while those who have important earthly positions in the church aren't important to his ministry, they nevertheless respected and approved of the work he was doing. As a matter of fact, it was agreed that Paul would be the primary witness to the Gentiles and the other apostles would continue to work primarily with the Jews. The center of the Jewish Christian church was Jerusalem and the center of the Gentile Christian church was Antioch.

24. What was interesting about how the NT church was referenced beginning in Antioch? Why was this so important that Luke specifically recorded it?

The end of Chapter 2 includes the account of Peter succumbing to pressure from the Jewish Christians to continue to separate from the Gentiles on the basis of adapting to the Mosaic Law. Paul not only identified the seriousness of the problem, but also publicly addressed the matter with Peter.

25. Why was it so important to Paul to change Peter's behavior toward the Gentile Christians? What is meant in verse 14?

26. What can we learn from this to apply in our own lives?

27. What wonderful truths are expressed in verses 15 and 16?

Professor Panning writes, “The term ‘sinner’ was a common derogatory term Jews attached to Gentiles. The Gentiles’ chief ‘sin,’ of course, was that they did not observe the Mosaic Law. They ate unclean foods, worked on the Sabbath, didn’t offer sacrifices, didn’t circumcise their sons, etc.”

28. How does that help us understand verses 17 and 18?

29. Why is it noteworthy that Paul shifts to the first person at this point?

30. How is that helpful and applicable in our lives of Christian witness?

31. “For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.” means:

32. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." means:

33. "I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" These are pretty strong words. Why was Paul so adamant about this?

34. What questions did you have while studying this section?

For next time:

Read and study Chapter 3, one of the clearest descriptions of justification and the purpose of the Mosaic law.

Galatians 3:1–4:31

Justification: How the Sinner Becomes Justified before God

Not by Works, but by Faith Alone

Paul now gets down to the issue, which is troubling him so about the situation in Galatia. This issue isn't really about the Mosaic Law but rather what it represents. It would seem that many (perhaps most) of the Israelites, including the leaders, didn't understand God's purpose for the Mosaic Law. Paul now makes it clear that the Judaizers' attempts to accept Jesus as the Savior and continue to follow the Mosaic law are not only misguided but dangerous to the faith of the new Christians. "Works are man's doing. Faith is accepting what God has done in Christ" is how Prof. Panning puts it in the People's Bible.

Paul makes his case with four arguments and proofs:

1. The Galatians' own experience (3:1-5);
2. Abraham's case (3:6-9);
3. The difference between law and gospel (3:10-14);
4. The promise given already to Abraham (3:15-18).

Galatians 3:1-5: The Galatians' Own Experience

"You foolish Galatians!" is the way Paul begins. The word "fool" doesn't imply ignorance, rather that the mental gifts and capabilities are not being used. As Scripture uses this word (see Matt. 5:22, 7:26, 25:2, Luke 12:20, 2 Cor. 11:21, Eph. 5:4), what's being communicated is someone who knows the Lord but chooses to ignore or walk away from him.

1. Look up the passages listed above and summarize what they mean with the understanding of “fool” as explained above.

2. What application does this have for each of us?

“Who has bewitched you? ... Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified” could be rendered, “What’s gotten into you? I painted a picture for you to make this clear to you.” Paul then goes on to ask the Galatians how they came to be convinced of their salvation.

3. What is the answer to Paul’s question?

4. How does the meaning of the word “Spirit” help us understand how this takes place?

5. Why is it so important that we as 21st century Christians understand this same thing so clearly?

Prof. Panning explains that the word, which has been translated, “suffered” actually means only “to experience.” It could be either good or bad.

6. What light does that shed on v. 4, especially if a more accurate translation could be “Have you experienced so much good...”?

7. What is Paul’s closing challenge in this argument about how the Galatians came to faith in the first place?

8. When would/could be a good time for us to bring up this information with others?

Galatians 3:6-9: Consider Abraham’s Case

The Judaizers clearly valued their relationship to Abraham. He was their ancestor, he followed the LORD in an exemplar manner, and they felt that their descent from him was the reason they were God’s chosen people. This is why Paul uses Abraham himself as a credible illustration of how people become righteous in the LORD’s sight.

9. What is Paul quoting in verse 6?

10. What difference does that make according to Paul?

11. What does Paul mean when he says, “The Scripture foresaw...and announced the gospel in advance?”

Galatians 3:10-14: The Difference Between Law and Gospel

In verses 10-14, Paul clearly describes the difference between the law, i.e. the Mosaic law, and the gospel. Paul then quotes Deuteronomy 27:26. Prof. Panning states that passage includes 3 iron clad requirements of the law.

12. Read Deut. 27:26 and identify what Prof. Panning was referring to.

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13. Why would Paul's statement have jarred the Galatians into thinking about this whole issue yet again?

14. What's the first thought that comes to our minds as well?

Immediately Paul reassures the Galatians and us that continuous flawless performance isn't what's required for salvation. Rather it's faith. He then quotes Habakkuk. 2:4

15. Look up Hab. 2:4. What was the prophet saying when he wrote it?

16. Why does Paul quote it at this point?

17. Paul then quotes Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 21:23. What are these passages about and what is Paul saying to the Galatians?

18. What's Paul saying to us?

19. When would it be helpful for us to use this section of Scripture?

Galatians 3:15-18: The Promise (the Gospel Message) Already Given to Abraham

This could be seen as Paul's "knock-out punch" in making his case against requiring the Gentile converts to keep the Mosaic law in order to be assured of salvation. The convincing argument is that Abraham didn't have to keep the Mosaic Law. Not only that, no one had to keep the Mosaic Law to be saved, including the patriarchs, because for 430 years it didn't exist! If God made a promise which God would/could never break and faith in that promise granted one eternal life, why in the world would anyone cling to a law which was necessary only because of man's unfaithfulness?

20. What does it mean that, "For, if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise...?"

21. So, if the Mosaic Law isn't any good for saving us, what was its purpose and why was it so important to God's OT people? i.e. what is the central purpose of Leviticus?

Galatians 3:19-25: A Description of the Law

In these verses Paul lists 4 inherent weaknesses of the law. Prof. Panning lists them as follows:

- A. The Mosaic Law was not primary, but was "added" to something superior, something already in existence.
- B. The law had to do with sin and "transgressions," not salvation.
- C. The law was of limited duration, "until the Seed... had come."
- D. The law required a "mediator."

22. Does the law disagree with the gospel and promise of the LORD? Explain.

23. Which verses explain to us that the Mosaic Law isn't primary, but rather it's secondary in the sense that it was, "added?"

24. Why was this important to the Galatians and why is it important to us?

25. What types of conversations will this information have impact upon?

26. Which verses explain to us that the law has nothing to do with salvation, but that it deals with sin and “transgression?”

27. What is the meaning of the word “transgression” and how does that help us understand the purpose of the law?

28. Which verses indicate that the Mosaic Law was of limited duration and what difference does that make?

29. Why is it so important that we keep in mind that this is talking about the Mosaic Law?

30. What does Jesus tell us remains in effect? Where in Scripture is it found?

31. How does this harmonize beautifully with the “new command” Jesus gave his disciples in the upper room just before his suffering and death?

32. What is the “new command” and where is it found?

33. What annual reminder do we have of this “new command?”

Look closely at verse 24. In the King James Version the law is described as a school master. The original Greek word, according to Prof. Panning, is *paidagogos*, the slave who accompanied a schoolboy to insure he didn't get into trouble on the way to school.

34. How does this help us to understand what the verse means?

35. How does verse 25 make it clear that Paul's not talking about the "new command" which is only possible after faith has been established, but Paul's talking about the Mosaic Law?

36. Where is the passage about the "mediator" and what does it mean? Why is that difficult for us to comprehend?

Galatians 3:26-29: Sons of God

Remembering that the problem here is that Judaizers wanted to make Gentile Christians "real Jews," these are very powerful verses. The Jews rightly claimed they had certain privileges because they were "heirs" of the promise to Abraham. That privilege was passed through the male. Inheritance was allotted in double portion to the firstborn son and in greater amounts to sons than to daughters. Whether or not this was "fair" is immaterial to the content and point Paul is making. It was part of the Mosaic Law.

37. What is Paul hereby declaring to the Galatian Christians?

38. This passage has been used as proof that women should be allowed to be pastors in the church. Is that a valid argument? Explain.

39. Why is verse 29 such a comforting “closer” for this section?

For next time:

Read and study chapter 4, a continuation of the clear description of justification and the purpose of the Mosaic Law.

Galatians 4:1-31

The parable of the minor heir, and an illustration from everyday life

Galatians 4:1-3

Paul is in the middle of helping the Galatian Christians, both Jew and Gentile, understand that keeping the Mosaic Law was never the way to salvation. There are a couple more illustrations he makes, using an example from everyday life to explain the purpose of the Mosaic Law. The comparison is to an heir to great riches and wealth. While it's true that the heir always has the inheritance awaiting him, as long as that child is young, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate.

1. How does this explain the role of the Mosaic Law in the history of the Jewish people?

2. How does it help us understand the purpose of the OT law?

Galatians 4:4-7

Prof. Panning points out the significance of the absence of the article “the” before the word law in this section. He writes, “It is important to note that in these verses the term ‘law’ does not have the article the either time it is used, as though it were limited just to the Mosaic Law that has been under discussion. It’s broader than that. ‘Law’ here refers to everything that God rightly demands of all people. The Savior’s work was not restricted to serving just his Jewish countrymen. It included the ‘all nations’ envisioned in the promise given to Abraham and hence included also the Galatians”

3. Explain the full meaning of verse 4, which so many of us memorized. When do we often hear these words and why are they so precious to us?
4. How does verse 6 yet again reinforce the truth that the faith which leads to our eternal life is an unearned gift from God?
5. How does verse 7 apply to us and comfort us, especially in times of doubt about our worthiness to be one of God’s children?

Galatians 4:8-11

Paul again directs encouragement to the Gentile Galatians.

6. Explain verses 8-11. Be sure to note yet again the statement that indicates our salvation is a gracious act of God.

7. What great application would these words have in our lives today?

Galatians 4:12-16

In verses 12-16, Paul appeals to the Galatians to remember how joyful they were when they first heard the message of Jesus Christ from Paul, even though his illness at the time was a trial to them.

8. What has occurred to mar and ruin their joy?

9. How could this apply to us as we deal with others around us who have become new Christians? That is, is it possible for us to spoil the joy of a new Christian? Explain!

Galatians 4:17-20

These passages again illustrate the depths of Paul's anguish about this situation. He is pleading for the Galatians to think about the truths of what they've been taught so they aren't led astray by those who are trying to lead them away from the message Paul brought to them.

Galatians 4:21-31

This section uses the example of Ishmael and Isaac as an allegory of the role of the law in the life of the NT Christian. Some have been perplexed to understand why Moses recorded the harsh way in which Sarah dealt with Hagar and Ishmael. An allegory, according to Prof. Panning is, a "comparison between two things that illustrate a spiritual truth....The actions of these real people in a real situation are an example of illustration of the spiritual principle under discussion." It would appear that the reason for the Sarah-Hagar account is in no small part to help us understand the relationship between being a child of grace and a child of the law.

10. What spiritual truth is Paul illustrating by recording this history in verse 23?

11. How does that apply to the Galatians and to us?

12. Explain verses 24-27.

13. What do vv 28 and 29 mean and how do they apply to the Galatians and to us?

14. How serious is trying to mix the requirements of the law with the Gospel message? How is this same danger present in our lives and among our friends? What should we do about it?

For next time:

Read and study the remainder of the book of Galatians, focusing on how the justified sinner is to live before God.

Galatians 5:1-6:10

How the Justified Sinner is to Live Before God

This begins the final major section of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul's very clear declaration that salvation is in no way due to keeping the Mosaic Law, or any law for that matter, raises the questions: Does that mean a Christian can do anything he wants? Are there no guidelines whatsoever? Paul here answers these questions, also in a very clear manner.

One more time he exhorts his readers to, "Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." After all, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." What beautiful words! Those of us who've always lived in freedom may not fully grasp the blessing that it is. We are aware of those who've put their lives on the line for the rest of the country and are grateful to them. It's impressive that those who are on the front lines and seeing oppression and the effects of oppression first hand are overwhelmingly convinced that the fight for freedom is worth it. A recent devotion contained the following report:

The church in Iraq has also been the target of violent threats and vandalism. It began as a small underground gathering with five families holding Bible studies and prayer meetings in different homes. Yet despite persecution, the church has grown dramatically in recent months, and they now meet in a large two-story building, topped by a lit cross. A sign on the building boldly proclaims, "Jesus is the light of the world." Despite daunting shadows or darkened days, with all that is in him, Sami Dagher believes in this hope. The light of Christ is real. The story must be told. "If they want to kill us all," he proclaims, "we are ready to die. But we are not going to close either the clinic or the church."

Just as formerly oppressed people abhor returning to that state once liberated, so we abhor returning to the slavery of the law in any shape or form once Christ has set us free!

Galatians 5:2-4

In the People's Bible Prof Panning writes that these verses give "three somewhat similar but overlapping reasons why the Galatian Christians should not accept circumcision:

1. It effectively negates Christ's sacrifice;
2. It obligates a person to keep the whole law;
3. It deprives a person of God's grace and thus puts him on his own, that is, on the "merit plan" of salvation."

1. After referring to his authority to make such statements, how does Paul make each of the points that Prof. Panning points out?

2. In what circumstances could we refer to these same passages?

a. in our own lives?

b. working with fellow Christians from any church body?

Galatians 5:5-6

These verses begin to make the transition to the remaining major point of Paul's letter.

3. Explain, "But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope." Remember the Scriptural meaning of the words faith, Spirit, righteousness, and hope.

4. What does Paul mean when he says, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value."? How would we apply this in our lives and in our conversations with others?

Galatians 5:7-12

"The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." The word here for love is of course agape—unselfish, self-sacrificing love. With this statement Paul introduces the emphasis of the remaining thoughts in his letter to this group of people he's so worried about.

With this final outburst of emotion, Paul again makes it very clear how important this issue is to the Galatian Christians. It's also very important to us.

5. What does Paul mean when he quotes a proverb familiar at this time, "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough."? (Hint: What does yeast represent here?)

6. How does Paul make the intensity of his concern and corresponding disdain for the Judaizers very clear indeed?

Galatians 5:13–6:10

These passages are Paul's answer to those who know Christ and are tempted to use their Christian freedom to their own detriment, as well as to the detriment of those around them. He sets up the explanation with rather clear contrasts. He contrasts the sinful nature or the "flesh" with manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

These manifestations of the Holy Spirit are just that: attitudes and good deeds possible only through His power. There is a rather strong temptation to err on a number of sides here. First of all we may be tempted to take credit for what the Holy Spirit makes possible and turn it into a reason to think we deserve more of the Holy Spirit or to think ourselves better than our fellow Christian who's struggling with some sin.

Second we may decide that if the Holy Spirit is within us, then whatever we want to do must be OK because it's coming from the Holy Spirit. Humanist philosophy, which is so prevalent in today's American and western cultures, feeds into this lie very nicely. The song of about 35 years ago put it something like this, "How can anything be wrong that feels so right?"

Finally, Satan will be right there when I do act according to the sinful nature, to accuse me of not really being a Christian at all. How can I be saved if I continue to behave in this manner? How could and why would God want anything to do with me, you loser?

Paul addresses each of these concerns in the closing verses of this epistle.

Galatians 6:16-18

Prof. Panning explains that in the original Greek it's not possible to clearly see whether the Greek word *pneuma* translated as "spirit" is referring to the spiritual nature that is within us or the Holy Spirit, which moves and acts through us. He proposes a slightly different use of the capital "S" than the NIV does. This would have a paraphrase of these verses reading as follows:

"So I say, live under the guiding influence of the Holy Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of your sinful nature. For the old sinful nature desires what is contrary to your new spiritual life. And the new spiritual life, in turn, is contrary to your old, original sinful nature. These two natures are in conflict with each other, so that, as a Christian who at all times retains an old Adam alongside your new man, you find yourself not doing what you want. But if you are led by the Holy Spirit, you are not under law but rather in sync with it."

7. How does this help us to understand these verses and the ones that follow them?

8. How does this translation also help us to keep straight how justification and sanctification work out in the lives of a Christian?

Galatians 6:19-24

This is a wonderfully clear comparison of what the two struggling natures within us look like.

9. Compare the two lists and define with attributes of each of the words. i.e. Give some examples of how we see each one manifested in our own lives.

10. How does Paul summarize the fruit of the Spirit?

11. Galatians 5:26—6:10 help us to see how we make use of this information to help one another as Christians. Explain in your own words what Paul is saying to us.

Galatians 6:10-17

12. This section summarizes the entire epistle. What does Paul say in summation?