

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

### Sermon Series: Growing a Culture of Grace

(Studies in Paul's letter to the Galatians)

### **Essentials for a Grace Culture**

(Galatians 6:6-18)

Study #11

#### Introduction: Famous last words...

Today, we're wrapping up nearly three months of exploring Paul's letter to the churches located in the region of Galatia. So, since we believe that Galatians was Paul's first letter, we are coming to the last words of Paul's first letter. And we usually pay close attention to someone's last words.<sup>1</sup>

The last words of the patriarch, Jacob, were words of blessing to his two grandsons. (Genesis 48) Moses' last words charged the Jews to be faithful to God. (Deuteronomy 31) Joshua's last words did the same thing. (Joshua 23-24)

Jesus gave us two very memorable "last words."

His first last words came right before He died on the cross. He said, **[John 19:30] "It is finished."**

He spoke His second last words to His disciples right before He ascended to heaven.

**[Acts 1:8] "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in**

***Jerusalem and in all Judea, and Samaria, and as far as the remotest part of the earth."***

Like these that I've quoted, last words are often weighty and memorable. Paul's last words here in Galatians are both.

Today, he gives us who want to lead grace-filled lives essential truth. And he gives essential truth to churches like ours, that want to grow a culture of grace.

His first last words are, importantly, and maybe surprisingly, about money.

#### **A Final Word About the Essential of Generosity (Galatians 6:6-10)**

#### **Beautiful Reciprocity (v. 6)**

***[6] The one who is taught the word is to share<sup>2</sup> all good things with the one who teaches him.***

Here, Paul urges Christians to financially support those who have teaching (and shepherding) ministries in the church.<sup>3</sup>

With respect to Paul's exhortation here, I commend our church for its support of its staff. There is long-standing generosity to the staff by the congregation - and the staff is very grateful.

And this theme of generosity extends to other ministries that benefit us, spiritually speaking. We are to pray for these ministries and give to them as we have opportunity.

Bless as you have been blessed.<sup>4</sup> The idea here is *reciprocity*.

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<sup>2</sup> The root meaning of this word (*koinonia*) is "to have something in common." When the early church in Jerusalem was growing spiritually, temporarily living in a near communal condition, and having impact on Jerusalem, this is the word that Luke (the author of Acts) chose to describe their interaction. (Acts 2:42) It speaks of a close and lasting bond, a partnership.

<sup>3</sup> We see from this verse that a paid teaching / preaching position in the church developed very early.

<sup>4</sup> Note, too, that this is a right which may be respectfully declined, as Paul did.

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<sup>1</sup> I was surprised to read that the last words of Sir Winston Churchill were (reportedly and not very memorably), "*I'm bored with it all.*"

Paul goes on to touch on the point of *priority* in giving.

### **Family Priority (v. 10)**

***[10] So then, while we have opportunity, let's do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.***

*Help your physical family*

The Bible is clear in both Old and New Testaments that the first priority for giving is to the family.

God wants us to first ensure that our flesh and blood family members - parents, kids, grandparents - are cared for.<sup>5</sup>

But you heard that word "*especially...*" in what I just read. The point here is that we are to take special care to "*do good*" to those who are members of our faith family.

*Help your faith family*

We take this exhortation seriously here at Northwest.

Contributions you make to the Benevolence Fund and to the Food Pantry very often benefit people who attend here. So, God bless you who are giving to both of these wonderful ministries.

Just as often, many of you have been a blessing because you noticed a pressing need and stepped up to meet that need - for a car repair or a washing machine repair or for something else you simply observed.

Over the years, countless numbers of people and families have been rescued from ruin because of the sacrificial gifts others have given to keep them afloat in times of need.

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<sup>5</sup> Implicit in the command to "*honor your father and your mother*" (Exodus 20:12; Matthew 15:4-6) is the idea of meeting the material needs of elderly parents when they are no longer able to care for themselves. Paul calls on Christians to meet the needs of their own households in 1 Timothy 5.

And then Paul calls us to "*do good to all people.*"

*Help "all people"*

This is a call to be generous to those outside the church with our resources of money, energy, and time.

Doing good "*to all people*" increases our salt and light quotient for Jesus. The church has never done this perfectly.<sup>6</sup>

But when Jesus' followers have been their healthiest, they have given to meet needs of all people.

And 2023 is a very timely time to give to all people, without distinction, without prejudice, and without expectation - no strings attached.<sup>7</sup>

As we have received, so let us give.

Then, sandwiched in between the principle of reciprocity and the priority of family (blood and faith) are words about sowing, reaping, and a harvest.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Law of the Harvest (vv. 7-9)**

***[7] Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a person sows, this he will also reap. [8] For the one who sows to his own flesh will reap destruction from the flesh, but the one who sows to the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit.***

***[9] Let's not become discouraged in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not become weary.***

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, believers in Jesus have committed deeply regrettable sins, too.

<sup>7</sup> Our Christian family has built orphanages, hospitals, schools, and nursing homes. It has fought for prison reforms, child labor laws, and the abolition of slavery. Today, it fights euthanasia, infanticide, and abortion. It delivers meals to shut-ins and builds decent homes and provides food for the poor - and more.

<sup>8</sup> The poet, Robert Louis Stevenson, didn't say it any better than Paul, but he said it memorably. When writing about the law of the harvest Stevenson wrote, "*Everyone, soon or late, sits down to a banquet of consequences.*"

We reap what we sow. That is true in every arena of life. The farmer harvests what he sows - and only what he sows. If he sows wheat, he won't harvest cotton.<sup>9</sup>

What is true on a farm is also true in a life with God.

What we sow in this life in terms of our generosity, we will reap when we stand in the presence of God.

To doubt this is, as Paul says, to mock God. To say, "*God doesn't reward those who honor Him!*", is to doubt His goodness and His justice.

Everything that Jesus says about receiving great reward in heaven - and He says a lot about this!<sup>10</sup> - tells us that faithfulness in this life affects the harvest we will reap in the next.

And, since God wants you to have a rich harvest, by all means SOW now by being outrageously generous to meet pressing needs in Jesus' Name.

Those (vv. 6-10) were about generosity were Paul's first last words. Now we come to his last last words.

*Ending with a bang...*

Galatians started off with a bang. It was high energy right out of the chute.

From the get-go it is clear that he is all about grace and faith, freedom in Jesus, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the Gospel - the good news that eternal life is given to the one who believes in Jesus.

And we are impressed with Paul's writing pace.

When I used to do a lot of running (even when people weren't chasing me) I had a pacing strategy for my races. When running a 5k or a 10k, I would start slowly, and then taper off at the end.

Not Paul. He started Galatians with intensity, and he ended with intensity.

Here, at the conclusion, he lists the first of three essentials for a fruitful life with Jesus. First up: Freedom.

### **Final Words About Grace Culture Essentials (Galatians 6:11-16)**

#### **The Essential of Freedom (vv. 11-13)**

*Legalists are cowards! (vv. 11-12)*

***[11] See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand!<sup>11</sup> [12] All who want to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.***

The life we were saved to live in Jesus is a liberated, dynamic, unpredictable journey into holiness, love, and risk-taking faith.

And then there is a life of legalism. Legalism kills freedom.

The legalists who had corrupted the faith of the new Christians in Galatia were turning Christianity into a "Jesus + the Law of Moses + ???" faith.

Paul says here that the only benefit of legalism is that it protects the legalists from those who oppose authentic Christianity.

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<sup>9</sup> This principle applies across the board: Grades generally reflect the diligence of our study. If we don't service our car's engine, it won't run as long as it would if it was well maintained.

<sup>10</sup> See the Sermon on the Mount, especially Matthew 6.

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<sup>11</sup> In verse 11, Paul claims authorship of Galatians with the words, "***See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.***" Paul likely dictated the bulk of this letter to an amanuensis / secretary but has written these closing thoughts in his own hand, for a personal touch. The reference to the size of the letters being different could point us to large letters due either to his poor eyesight (See Galatians 4:12-15), or to his emphasizing the content of his closing thoughts.

Paul was constantly in hot water with Pharisees for teaching that non-Jewish Christians did not have to keep Old Testament Law. He even said that JEWISH Christians no longer had to keep the Law.

It was Paul's teaching about this freedom that led to so much of his suffering. And did he ever suffer.

In the next to the last verse of the letter, he wrote, **[17] From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.**

The wounds that Paul's body bore were there exactly because he was so clear on the Gospel message.

He taught that faith alone in Christ alone justifies a person before God, without respect to Law, rules and rituals, or works.<sup>12</sup>

But legalists are willing to do anything to avoid suffering. They'll even alter the only message that can save sinners with another message that adds works. They switched just to stay safe.

So, legalists are cowards. They are also braggarts.

*Legalists are braggarts (v. 13)*

**[13] For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they want to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh.**

The legalists urged Christians to keep the Law's requirements because that gave them bragging rights. "Our converts agree with us that pleasing God requires faith in Jesus AND Law keeping!"

They taught legalism because it made them respectable. And a legalistic life is very often safe, clean, and respectable.

Now, I'm not against safety, cleanliness, or respectability.

But that sort of life may not always follow if we follow Jesus. Our Lord spent His life with the least, the last, and the lost, got very involved with human chaos, and He died on a Roman cross.

Jesus' life was anything but safe, He got involved in broken people's messes, and He was disrespected for doing so.

If we follow Him into freedom and grow a culture of grace here, it's going to be messy.

Following Jesus into service, into sacrificial love, into a unified diversity, into the ministry of restoration like what Bill talked about last Sunday is going to be messy.

But it's going to be powerful, which is exactly what we see in the life of the Apostle Paul.

He lived the truth, suffered for the truth, and invited all who believed in Jesus into the messiness of freedom. He kept the main thing the main thing and majored on the essentials.

Freedom was *essential*. Another *essential* immediately follows. The cross of Jesus is an essential element of our faith.

### **The Essential of the Cross (v. 14)**

*The cross - the object of our boast*

**[14] But far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.**

#### Crucifixion...

Crucifixion is among the most ghastly forms of torture and capital punishment ever devised. Back in Roman times, people with manners simply didn't mention crucifixion. It was a taboo topic.

So, Paul's bringing up crucifixion would have been jarring to a first century reader who wasn't familiar with Jesus' story.

<sup>12</sup> Some of Paul's sufferings are recorded in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29.

But, from Paul's day to our own, Christians have always boasted about the cross of Jesus.

### Boasting, for good or ill...

We here in San Antonio had a great, twenty-year run of boasting about the Spurs and their long string of appearances in the playoffs and five NBA championships.

Even though we weren't Spurs players, we still boasted about the Spurs as if we were the ones who had played and won against LeBron James. (And who knows? We may be on the verge of another Spurs-boasting era, courtesy of young mister Wembanyama...)

Boasting about the Spurs was all good clean fun, of course (unless you weren't a Spurs fan). But some boasting is nothing more than ugly arrogance.

You know what I'm talking about. Politicians and athletes and celebrities and, yes, Christians, may boast and brag about successes.

Paul rejects personal boasting and then boasts about how great it is to boast about one thing.

### Boasting about God...

When the Old Testament Jews were spiritually healthy, their biggest boasts were always all about God's exploits. And when they bragged about God, they would most often zero in on the Exodus.

The first thing that came to their minds was the deliverance of Israel from Egypt through the parted Red Sea.

They were excited to boast about the great and awesome God they served who had led them out of Egyptian slavery.

Today, when we Christians boast about God's great exploits, we don't focus on the Exodus. We focus on the cross of Jesus. Jesus' death on the cross is the crux moment of history.

Nothing comes close to the impact of the cross, or to the end of the story of the cross, the empty tomb.

And the message of the cross has been the theme of the letter to the Galatians from the start.

*The cross - the foundation of our salvation (Galatians 1)*

***[1:3] Grace to you and peace from God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, [4] who gave Himself for our sins...***

There it is, right at the beginning - a reference to the cross.

Paul says that Jesus' death was voluntary. His life wasn't taken from Him against His will. He ***"gave Himself."*** On assignment from the Father, the Son came of His own free will to earth, to die for us.<sup>13</sup>

By His death on the cross He took away our sins, so that now, anyone who believes in Jesus receives eternal life.<sup>14</sup>

I always find it interesting to watch when someone is honored for an accomplishment and he or she is brought up on to a stage to give an acceptance speech.

Typically, the award winner talks about their award and their skill, talent, and prowess. And everybody claps and cheers.

But occasionally, an award winner will walk to the front and spend the bulk of their time pointing out what others have done. *"Sure, I had some successes on the basketball court / the football field / screen, but did you see what this guy did?"* or *"Thanks for the award, but I wouldn't have been able to do anything without her help."*

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<sup>13</sup> The Bible teaches that the penalty for sin is death. In the first book of the Bible - Genesis - God told the first man, Adam, that if he ever ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would die. So, when Adam ate from that tree, he died. He began the steady decline toward physical death, but he instantly died, spiritually. That special part of him that related to God died. Paul means all of that when he says in Romans ***[6:23] the wages of sin is death.***

<sup>14</sup> John the Baptist was the first to recognize that Jesus was the ***"lamb of God"*** who came to take away the sin of the world. (John 1:29)

They use their moment in the limelight to shine the spotlight on another. They use the time they've been given to boast about another.

That's what Paul says we who follow Jesus can do to grow a culture of grace. When praised for some good thing we've done, we accept the praise, point to Jesus, and say, *"Look at what Jesus did! What else could I do given what He did for me?"*

Boasting in and reveling in and drawing attention to the cross of Christ is essential to leading a fruitful life for Jesus.

And arising out of *that* essential thing is a third essential.

### **The Essential of a New Creation (v. 15)**

Back in Galatians 5, Paul wrote, **[6] For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything...** There, he ended that sentence with, ***"but faith working through love."***

The point there was that for Christians, the biggest game in town wasn't keeping up with certain rituals. No, the biggest game in town for the Christian is to excel in the grace of love.

Here at the end, he writes, again, **[15] For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision...** but he ends with, ***"but a new creation."***

This is Paul getting down to the most basic basic at the most personal level.

So, let me ask you - *Are you a new creation in Jesus Christ?*

You and I have invested lots of time looking into Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia. Eleven Sundays if you've been here for all of them. And even if this is the only message from Galatians you've heard, you've still invested your thirty minutes today.

If you now understand the basic flow of Galatians, I'm glad.

If you now grasp the idea that GRACE is superior to Law, that FAITH beats works, and that serving others is better than serving self, that is wonderful.

If you have learned some biblical history from the stories and the characters Paul has referred to throughout this letter - people like Sarah and Abraham and Isaac and Ishmael and Hagar - great.

But all that knowledge and information is non-essential. Information isn't the essential thing.<sup>15</sup>

Wouldn't it be awful if you've gleaned all that information and haven't become a new creation in Christ?

What a tragedy it would be for you to have gained great perspective on historical facts but to have never taken to heart the promise of Jesus, the One who gave Himself for your sins.

What a loss it would be if after looking at Galatians, you have never said *"Yes!"* to Jesus' invitation to believe and receive the gift of eternal life.

Today can be the watershed moment of your life. Look at the cross and see there a Savior who died for you. Listen to His promise.

***[[John 3:16] For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.***

The story of all stories is the story of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection. The story to end all stories in your life is the moment you become a new creation by God's grace when you believe in Jesus.

Believe and receive today! And, believing, walk with Jesus into these essentials.

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<sup>15</sup> Some of the most helpful articles and background materials I have in my library were written by people who don't or didn't believe. Encyclopedic knowledge doesn't guarantee the reception of eternal life by faith.

**Summary: Those who walk in essential things (v. 16)**

***[16] And all who will follow this rule,<sup>16</sup> peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.<sup>17</sup>***

By “**rule**” Paul isn’t talking about a specific rule, as in a list of rules we must obey. That would be contrary to the spirit of the letter!

He has in mind a standard to which we aspire, which consists of what we’ve already seen today.

First, we take next steps with Jesus into a culture of grace as we walk in freedom.

*Walk in freedom!*

***[5:1] It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.***

Paul wants to set us free from the “**yoke of slavery**” that is legalism. Legalism was a problem in the first century and it is alive and kicking in 2023.

We can fall into legalism by it having it imposed from the outside. Or, just as easily, we can put ourselves under a legalistic system by trying to measure up or fit in.

Either way, submitting to legalism will lead us to feel guilty for not measuring up or arrogant for being successful.

And God didn’t save us to make us proud of ourselves or to load us down with guilt. He wants us to rest in His love and acceptance.

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<sup>16</sup> “**Rule**” here is the Greek word *kanon*. It is the word from which we get our English word, “canon,” which refers to the standard applied to the books that were accepted as inspired books by the early church. Those books met the standard of inspiration.

<sup>17</sup> This is the only time that this phrase (“**the Israel of God**”) is used in the Bible. While there is debate about what it refers to, my own view is that Paul was referring to the remnant within the Jewish nation that believed in Jesus.

He wants you to live, overwhelmed with gratitude to Him for the freedom you have in Christ: freedom from condemnation, freedom to pursue holiness, freedom to live in moment-by-moment dependence on the Spirit.

That is the freedom available to you. Walk in it. And imagine the life and impact and joy that will be present in our church as we are, together, increasingly marked by this freedom.

And take next steps with Jesus into grace as we walk in light of His cross.

*Walk in light of the cross of Christ!*

Earlier in this letter, Paul reminded his readers about how he had preached when he came to them on the First Missionary Journey.

He made it his aim to present the cross event so vividly that it was as if the Galatians were watching the crucifixion take place before their eyes.

***[3:1] You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?***

Paul turned the ears of his hearers into eyes. From the very beginning, the cross was central to the Galatians - and to our own - understanding of what Jesus was all about.

The cross is also central to what following Jesus is all about.

Paul wrote that when he believed in Jesus, the old Paul was crucified. The old Paul died just as surely as Jesus had died on the cross. ***[Galatians 2:20] I have been crucified with Christ.***

Then, a new Paul, a born-again Paul, was raised up just as surely as Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day.

That is true of us all. When we believed in Jesus, the old “us” was co-crucified with Christ, and we were given new life in Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

Paul’s testimony is this: “***...the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me.***”

In other words, Paul...  
 ...had the cross event permanently imprinted on his mind.  
 ...never forgot that the “old Paul” was dead, courtesy of Jesus’ death on the cross.  
 ...led a moment-by-moment life of faith in a Jesus who proved His love by giving up His life for him on the cross.

That is what it means to lead a cross-centric life.

*Walk as the new creation in Jesus you are!*

And remember that just as truly as the old “you” is dead, because of God’s power the new fully alive “you” is an entirely new creation, enabling you to live the life of love and service for which you were redeemed.<sup>19</sup>

Live according to these realities and God’s peace and mercy will yours in fullest measure.

Growth in Jesus is what we’re all about here. And we usually describe that growth by the image of taking next steps with Him.

We picture the road to maturity as a climb to greater and greater heights of spirituality and maturity, day by day, year by year.

That’s a great picture, but there are other images that may sometimes be helpful.

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<sup>18</sup> This is explicitly stated in Romans 6:6 and with a slight difference in Colossians 2:20 (“***died with Christ***”).

<sup>19</sup> See 2 Corinthians 5:17.

Growth in Jesus may also be imagined as a more and more sharply focused centering on the essentials.

This image affirms that the main thing in life is to keep the main thing the main thing. Aim for the bulls-eyes of freedom, the cross of Jesus, and our new reality in Jesus.