



Roanoke, Virginia

July 6, 2025

## ***“Burdensome Work”***

*Galatians 6:1-16*

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Our scripture reading for today comes to us from Paul’s letter to the Galatian church. Listen to how Paul concludes his letter and listen for the word of God.

<sup>1</sup>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. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. <sup>2</sup>Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. <sup>3</sup>For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. <sup>4</sup>All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. <sup>5</sup>For all must carry their own loads.

<sup>6</sup>Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.

<sup>7</sup>Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. <sup>10</sup>So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

<sup>11</sup>See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! <sup>16</sup>As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

The work of following Jesus is not easy work. It is burdensome work. And yet—as Paul reminds the Galatian church—it is *necessary* work.

We often imagine faith as a quiet, private thing—a set of beliefs tucked away in our minds or hearts. But that is only part of it. Social activist Jim Wallis says: “Faith is always personal, but never private.” Faith is personal in that it is deeply unique to each individual, the convictions you come to believe through a personal connection to and experience of a higher power. Yet, your deeply held beliefs must then direct the ways in which you live, the ways in which you love, forgive, and welcome, thus not being kept private.

I think Paul would agree with this. Paul never saw faith as detached from daily living. For Paul, to be “in Christ” is to be in the work. The work of justice. The work of transformation and healing. The work of reconciliation and compassion. And yes—the work of carrying burdens.

In his final chapter of his letter to the Galatian church, Paul somewhat summarizes all the arguments he has made up to this point. Yet, every aspect of the summary seems to introduce a new paradox:

- Having argued against the threats of fleshliness, Paul ends by writing a chapter of extreme carnality.
- Having strongly argued against circumcision, Paul concludes that it means nothing if you are circumcised or not—one is no better than the other.
- Having argued for the sake of God’s gift of freedom-shaped grace, Paul reminds his readers that we will reap whatever we sow.
- Having suggested that those who are in opposition should mutilate themselves, Paul argues that any transgressor should be restored with a spirit of gentleness.

And, within the final chapter itself, we are confronted with another paradox. To fulfill the law of Christ, Paul states you must “bear one another’s burdens.” And then, just a few breaths later, a seeming contradiction: “For all must carry their own loads.” Which is it? Are we meant to share the weight? Or shoulder it ourselves? Is there a distinction? The answer is, of course, *yes*.

When Paul says, “bear one another's burdens,” the Greek is from the word **baros**, which implies heavy, overwhelming loads—the kinds of burdens no one should carry alone. But when he says “each must carry their own load,” the word is **phortion**, like a backpack—a manageable daily load, something unique to each person, not meant to be offloaded onto others.

In other words, Paul isn’t contradicting himself. He’s describing the rhythm of community: We each carry our own backpack. But when life dumps something heavier—grief, illness, injustice,



catastrophe, loss—we are called to step in, lift up, and bear it *together*. And Paul also names the danger of trying to walk this life of faith in isolation, as if we can do it all on our own. He says, "*If those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.*"

As Amy Peeler suggests in her commentary, this is the person who has convinced themselves they don't need the community.<sup>1</sup> They can bear their burdens—even their overwhelming **baros**—alone. They can resist temptation without accountability. They can offer help without ever admitting their own weakness. They not only imagine faith as a solo journey, but they are also living out their faith alone.

But Paul knows better. He knows that kind of thinking will leave you not only isolated but crushed beneath the weight. Because when the inevitable burdens come, when the grief hits, when the injustice breaks your heart, when the temptation overwhelms—and there is no one beside you—then indeed, you will carry the load all by yourself. So, Paul urges mutuality: "*Those who are taught the word must share in all good things.*" In other words, we pour into each other. We lean on each other. We teach each other and we learn from each other. We share the load. The helped help the helpers, and the helpers are reminded of their own need.

The life of faith was never meant to be lived in silos of self-sufficiency. It is a web of interdependence—each carrying their own load, yes, but never bearing the overwhelming burdens alone. But this burdensome work isn't limited to individuals. Paul's letter is saturated with communal responsibility. He says, "*Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all.*" Not just for the insiders. Not just for the ones who fit the mold. Not just for the circumcised. Not just for those who carry the right label or check the right theological or political boxes.

**For the good of all.** This is a radical claim. Especially in a political climate like ours, where "all" gets sliced, sorted, and filtered by race, party, nationality, gender, orientation, or ideology. Paul reminds us: the work of faith doesn't stop at the borders we've drawn. The call to bear burdens, to do good, to labor for justice, is not restricted by tribal lines or faith tradition or physical attributes. It is work for all. It is burdensome work. But it is ultimately the work of a **new creation**.

This new creation is, in Paul's theology, a community where burdens are shared. Where responsibility is owned. Where goodness extends beyond the familiar. Where grace dismantles the dividing walls. Where circumcision—or any human-made marker—is no longer the litmus test of belonging. Only one thing matters: the new creation God is bringing to life.

But let's be honest. We've struggled with this. As a church. As a nation. As a people. We have failed to bear one another's burdens. We have ignored suffering that didn't touch us directly. We have built systems that hoard power and leave others crushed beneath the weight. We have weaponized faith to exclude rather than to heal. And even when we do not get it right—and that is

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Peeler in her essay on Galatians 6:1-16 in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 4*.



most of the time—thanks be to God—for we have also seen glimpses of the new creation: In communities rallying to support the grieving. In movements that demand justice for the marginalized. In churches that choose welcome over fear. In voices that refuse to let the burden of inequality go unchallenged. We have seen glimpses of the new creation in the work of this church and people in our own congregation:

- In the work of care and compassion through our flower delivery ministry, our grief team, and our visitation committee, when the burdens of sorrow and isolation are met with love and support.
- In the work of video visitation through Assisting Families of Inmates and programs through House of Bread where burdens are lifted through connection and compassion for individuals and families impacted by incarceration—the new creation glimpsed in restored dignity.
- In the work of PCC Pathways and West End Center, and our work with Highland Park and Morningside Elementary, where burdens of educational disparity are met with hope and opportunity—the new creation seen in every child’s potential.
- In The Alexa House, where we stand with and support families facing housing insecurity—the new creation felt in shelter, in presence, in solidarity.
- In our advocacy for and support of affordable housing initiatives through partners like Restoration Housing and Habitat for Humanity and affordable healthcare initiatives through partners like Family Service of Roanoke Valley and the Bradley Free Clinic—where burdens of inequality are named and confronted.
- In our church’s diverse and inclusive programming and faith formation for all ages, seeking to meet all who enter our doors right where they are, accepting them for exactly who they are, where the burdens of exclusion are replaced by the welcome of the beloved community—the new creation breaking through with every act of radical love.

We have seen glimpses of the new creation!

But the work is not done.

The burden is not fully lifted.

