

# BECOMING TOGETHER:

Toward The  
Beloved  
Community

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A WALK THROUGH GALATIANS AND ANTI-RACISM



**Session 4**

# FROM THE PRESENT EVIL AGE TO NEW CREATION



Paul's letter to the Galatians was in response to a specific issue - about the pressure that Galatians were feeling to become full-fledged Jews through circumcision. But his response reveals Paul's greater thinking about the gospel and what it's all about. For such a short letter, it reveals his radical vision of life in Christ. The grand thrust of his letter can be seen as this: the movement from bondage to this "present evil age" into freedom in the "new creation".



# NEW CREATION EMBODIED BY THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

**PAUL EMPHATICALLY CONCLUDES HIS LETTER WITH THIS  
STATEMENT:**

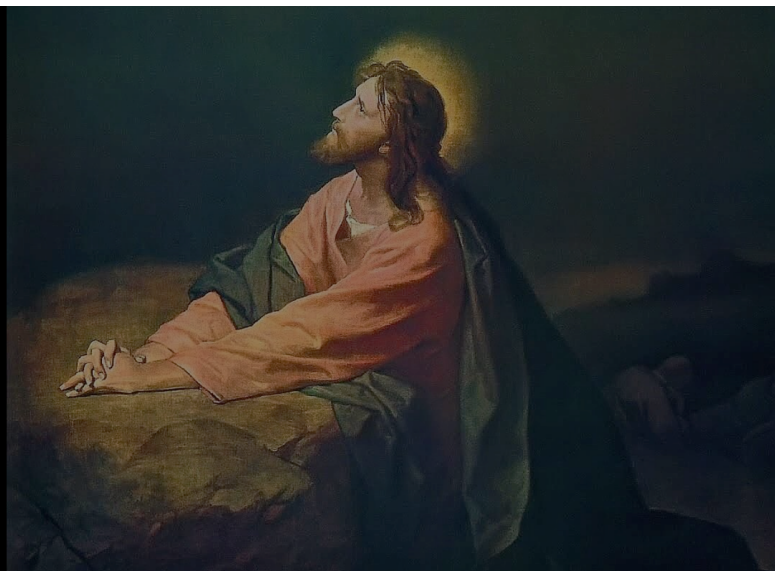
*“For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision  
is anything; but a new creation is  
everything!” (6:15)*

This new creation was the whole point of everything for Paul. This is why Christ gave himself, this is why the Spirit was given to those who believed. It was to bring about this new creation.

It's not just a cosmic, abstract new creation, but a new creation that is concretely manifested. And it was most concretely manifested in the creation of radically new communities. These new communities would reflect the unconditioned gift of God in Christ: that is, these communities would be formed without regard to one's worth, and without heed to pre-existent norms of acceptability.

This is why in this new community, there was now no Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free - all were one in Christ.

## LIFE IN THE SPIRIT VS LIFE IN THE FLESH



Those who place their life in Christ now live by the Spirit. Life in the Spirit is to live “*consistently with the truth of the gospel.*” (2:14)



The purpose of life in the Spirit is to activate, enable and enact the new community that embodies the new creation. The Spirit leads to community and harmony. The Spirit is thus at the root of the Beloved Community.

**The Spirit, however, is actively opposed by what Paul calls the flesh.**

FLESH VS SPIRIT



**THIS IS ANOTHER DOMINANT POLARITY IN PAUL'S THINKING: SPIRIT VS FLESH.**

*“Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.” (5:16-17)*

# LIFE IN THE FLESH AS THAT WHICH TEARS APART

A close-up photograph of two hands held palm-up, covered in dark, textured mud or dirt. The hands are positioned against a dark, smoky background. The fingers are spread, and the mud is smeared across the palms and fingers, symbolizing the 'works of the flesh' mentioned in the text.

What is the main difference between life in the Spirit and life in the flesh? According to Paul, life in the Spirit builds community and harmony, while life in the flesh ruins and destroys community.

## PAUL DESCRIBES WORKS OF THE FLESH:

*“Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.” (5:19-21)*



Paul was not talking about these in a moralistic way: that these are bad moral things to do. But if you read the context carefully, these are things that would destroy community. Works of the flesh work to tear people apart. Life in the Spirit, by contrast, builds up life and community.



Human beings have an innate need for the affirmation of their worth and dignity. In a healthy community, this is provided for each person. In an unhealthy community, honour is a finite commodity, and there becomes a competition for it.

Honour becomes a competition where it is attached to power, status and influence. This competition for honour became a central feature of life in the Roman-Greek era. It is hard to underscore here in this short talk just how central just quest and competition for honour was.

**AS ONE SCHOLAR SAYS:**

*“Honor was a precious but unstable commodity, requiring active promotion and persistent demonstration in a court of opinion that continually looked on with a critical eye.”  
(Paul and the Gift, John Barclay, p.434).*

Doesn't this sound like our current environment with social media? Maybe some things haven't really changed.

**AND FURTHERMORE:**

*“As recent research has emphasized, almost all social relations in Paul's cultural context were both ordered and threatened by the competition for honor.” (Paul and the Gift, p.433).*

Thoughts, behaviours and actions were shaped by this competition. In essence, people were enslaved to this ethos of competition for honour. This was especially true for the Galatian people, who had already been vanquished and historically stripped of their honour. Paul's letter is full of warnings against slipping back into this ethos of behaviours and norms: ***“If, however, you bit and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.” (5:15)***



## MODERN DAY VYING FOR HONOUR AMONG MARGINALIZED GROUPS

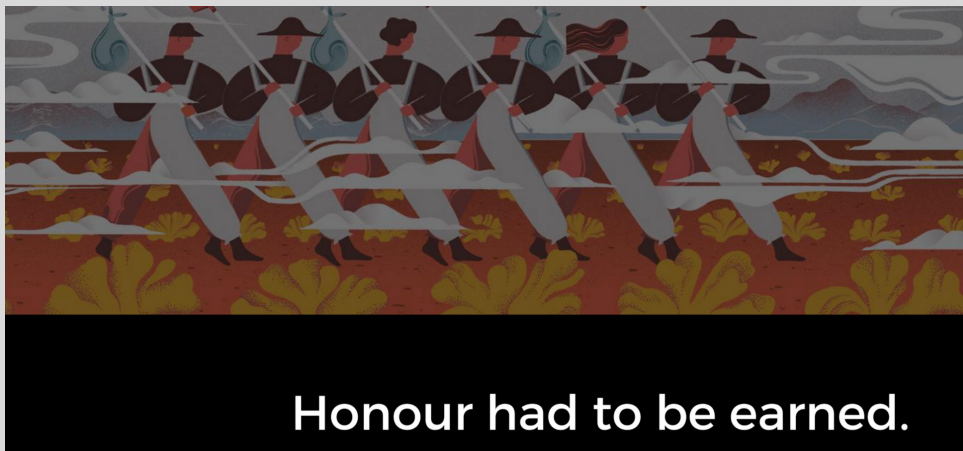
I think about our context today, and people are not that different. We all seek our own forms of honour and dignity. We value the esteem of those around us. In that way, we are innately social creatures.

But in society, there becomes a stratification in how this honour is doled out to its people. There becomes a privileged class whose honour is well protected. And I



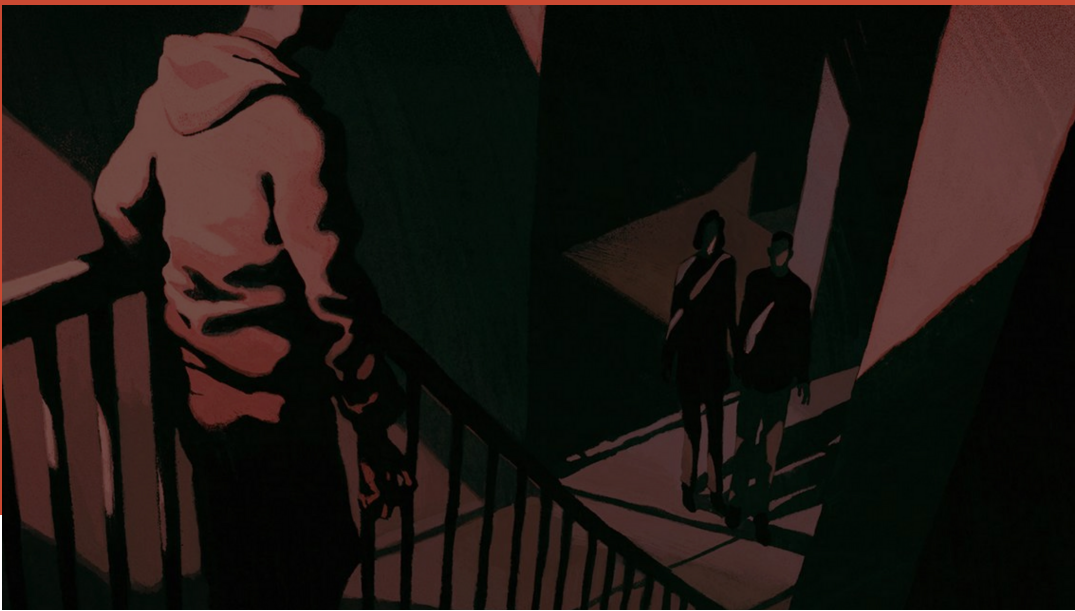


think this is part of what we mean when we say “white privilege”. White people have a built in honour that is protected. Within that protected confine, they are free to work hard, make good choices and find a place within our society. Of course there is always natural competition, but that becomes a competition on merits, on building the right networks and relationships. Hard effort takes place within that protected space of honour. For those on the margins, however, one’s honour is not given - **it must be earned.**



The 1st generation immigrants had lived lives where honour was not given. National honour had been taken away by greater powers. Immigrant life stripped them of honour while they ran convenience stores and spoke little English. This need for honour often carried into churches, leading to competition, conflict and splits in the community. Many of you bore the pain of those conflicts and splits.





In racialized communities like our black communities, they have already been pushed aside physically and geographically into pockets isolated from the rest of society. They have already been stripped of honour at the community level. Within their own spaces, they vie and compete for whatever honour is available in their environments. When honour has been taken away, one's honour and dignity is a fragile and must always be guarded with vigilance. This leads to street level competition.

The rise in gun violence is directly attributable to this quest for honour within their own confines. The spike in gun violence has correlations with the rise in social media. Before, conflicts arose from direct, face-to-face encounters. Nowadays, trash talking and conflict are exacerbated through interactions via social media. Modern gang violence in Toronto is about protecting one's honour - one's "rep" so to speak. There is a cycle of revenge,



because not to avenge the death of one of your people is to lose face and honour in that context.

It is difficult to understand for those of us whose honour is quite well protected now: by our economic status, our jobs, our neighbourhoods, and our middle class sensibilities. Part of the privilege of the model minority status has been a relatively safe space for us to live our lives unfettered by great threats to our honour, as long as we know and hold our place. So what has happened in our context is a stratification between those whose honour is not under great threat or competition, and those who face daily and recurring threats to their honour. In a context like that, it is so difficult to build community.



# LIFE IN THE SPIRIT: LIFE THAT BUILDS HARMONY & COMMUNITY

Life in the Spirit brings about freedom from previous norms and notions of worth. One has found freedom in Christ.

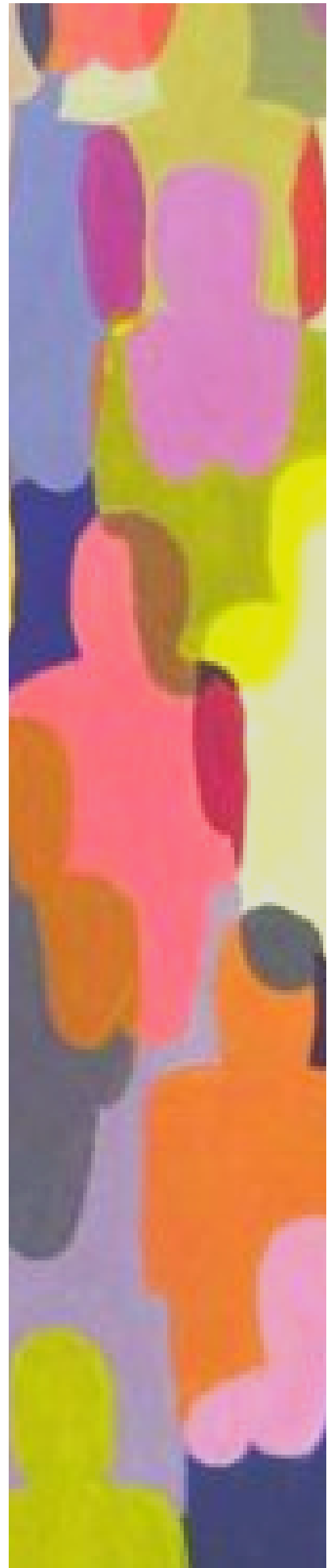
But Paul says this: *“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence (or the flesh), but through love become slaves to one another.” (5:13)*

For Paul, freedom is not the absence of allegiance to anything. It is not license to do whatever you want. It is, rather, the freedom to choose where you place that allegiance. In Christ, freedom is to become free from prior notions of worth and norms, but now to become slaves to one another in love. We have become free from the previous standards of honour, and now give honour to one another rooted in love.

Because Christ has given his life to us without regard to our worth and honour, we not confer that gift onto others as well. Honour is still present, but the previous system of honour is subverted. Honour is now built on love, service and self-giving.

The fruit of the Spirit builds up this new community: *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.”* (5:22)

Again, these are things to develop one’s moral character or superiority. These are fruit for the purpose of building up community. When this fruit is borne, the new community can thrive.



Faith as the mark of life in Christ, evidence by practice of community built without regard to one's worth.



*“And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.” (5:24-25)*

Faith, for Paul, is not something that takes place in our minds. It is not merely a subjective belief. It is the sign, mark or evidence of life in Christ. The evidence of faith is the practice of a community guided by the Spirit, that bears the fruit of the Spirit.

Paul again warns: *“Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.” (5:26)* That was the hallmark of the old community.

In the new community, love becomes the standard. It becomes a place of bearing one another's burdens. Part of bearing one another's burdens is understanding that people are coming from many different broken and hurt places, and that this will result in unfavourable characteristics.



Broken people come into a community with selfishness, dishonesty, malice, bad character, and many other negative attributes. These are things that do indeed destroy community. To this, Paul exhorts: *“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.” (6:1)*

This new community is a place of restoration, in a spirit of gentleness. That last sentence of not being tempted is a warning against becoming too judgmental and self-righteous ourselves. Only those who have received the Spirit should restore such people.

Being a person of the Spirit requires great personal maturity, self-insight and personal character. It is such a long and difficult journey to becoming such a community. But ultimately this community is a place of healing from damage caused by loss of honour and dignity. Restoration of honour, place of understanding and maturity.





# CHURCH AS THE EMBODIMENT OF THIS NEW, BELOVED COMMUNITY

This is what the church was called to be. In essence, the Beloved Community that Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed about.

In many ways, I am so proud of our community of St. Timothy. I think through the many years of critically studying Scripture, we have been shaped by the Spirit to become more and more a community of the Spirit. A community where the fruit of the Spirit is manifest. I am thankful for that, I feel blessed by it, and I am hopeful.

A challenging question that comes to my mind is this: having come to where we're at now, has this been made possible by people who are quite similar



in background to one another? Can we build this kind of community with those who are very different from us? From those of very different socioeconomic backgrounds? Different racial backgrounds? And most poignantly for the purposes of this study: those who bear the brunt of our society's systemic racism, namely our black brothers and sisters? What emotions do we feel, what thoughts come to our mind, when we ask these questions?

I think of these questions because I don't think our whole world will change overnight. But in Christ, God brought forth a new creation, and those of us who have been called by God's grace are called to be active partners in bringing about this new creation through the formation of new communities. This is our calling for this time and place, and I pray that we may be faithful to our calling.

# QUESTIONS FOR US

## QUESTION 1

What are you thankful for about our St. Timothy community? In what ways have we been blessed?

## QUESTION 2

Have we come to where we're at in part because of the similarity of our backgrounds?

## QUESTION 3

Can we build this kind of community with those who are very different from us? Especially our black brothers and sisters who bear the brunt of systemic racism? If so, what are some steps we can take?

## QUESTION 4

What emotions do you feel, what thoughts come to your mind, as you think about these questions?