

April 27, 2014
Community Baptist Church
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Galatians
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to study Galatians 4:8-20.

1. Contrast the idea that we do not know God by nature with the idea that we now know God because we are known by God.
2. In what ways did Paul want the Galatians to become like him, and in what ways had he become like them?
3. What do you suppose was Paul's "condition" when the Galatians first met him, and how would that affect their relationship?
4. Describe a situation in which you have observed a false teacher making much of someone for his own purposes.

WHY WOULD A DELIVERED CHRISTIAN DESIRE TO RETURN TO SLAVERY?

Galatians 4:8-20

There are heart-touching stories that tell of people who are down-and-out only to be discovered by someone of wealth, prestige, or power who, for various reasons, takes an interest in them. Stories like the classic musical *My Fair Lady* are in that vein. It tells about the poor, unsophisticated Eliza Doolittle who is discovered by a phonetician named Henry Higgins who is determined to turn the urchin into a high-classed lady. She successfully becomes what every English girl dreamed of being.

Or there is the great classic by Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*. Poor Oliver Twist was growing up in such terrible conditions that our heart breaks to read about his plight. Things go from bad to worse as the boy is able to leave the abusive orphanage to become an apprentice, only to discover that the apprentice family is more abusive than the orphanage. Finally he escapes and, like the poor soul who jumps out of the frying pan into the fire, he lands with a bunch of ruffians led by a guy name Fagin. Eventually, a kind gentlemen named Mr. Brownlow discovers him, delivers him from the gang of hoodlums, and begins to train him to be an English Gentleman. However, in a gut-wrenching turn of events, Fagin's ruffians capture and enslave Oliver again. The story turns out well, as you know, as Oliver is returned to Mr. Brownlow to live happily ever after.

Stories like these are much like the wonderful story of Hosea. God arranged for His spokesman to marry a prostitute so that the prophet would be able to experience the pain God experienced in His relationship with the nation of Israel. When his redeemed wife returned to prostitution, Hosea patiently retrieved her and brought her home. "Why would he do that?" we protest. He did it because God wanted to illustrate His amazing love for His people.

And so it is throughout the history of humanity. Over and over God delivers His chosen people from the slavery of sin only to have them follow after foolishness and try to return to that slavery again. Why would people show such lack of appreciation for God's kindness? Why would anyone who has tasted freedom want to return to slavery again? Why indeed! Can we not sympathize with such irresponsible thinking? We, like the Galatian Christians, often stumble and nearly fall back into slavery as we walk the road of freedom where God has placed us.

Those Christians had enjoyed freedom from the curse of the law because Paul kindly, patiently led them to Jesus Christ who set them free. But one day along came some very persuasive teachers who subtly convinced the Christians that in reality they needed to live in slavery after all. Paul was livid that they would even think about "drinking the Kool Aid." Imagine how Christ who bought our freedom at the price of His blood feels when we flirt with getting back into slavery.

Did Paul Labor in Vain (vv.8-11)?

Paul was perplexed. That is quite an assessment about a man who was generally unruffled, studious, and, for the most part, in control of the situation. For example, see him take charge as the ship was about to break into pieces (Acts 27). But, in this case, he wondered, “How is it that the Christians turned back to slavery?” (vv.8-9). That was a fair question in light of the fact that, like all of us, the Galatians were slaves by nature. Paul argued, *Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods (v.8).*

But wait! Is it not true that everyone knows about God? Well, the information that speaks of God is certainly out there. At the very least, God has revealed the essential traits of His character in nature. God has already revealed much about Himself in our consciences as He has written His law on our hearts. Some people even seek for this “unknown” God by reading His Bible. But it is even possible to read the Bible and still only know **about** God. Any intelligent person can read the Bible and discuss the Bible on a level of knowing facts about God. But even demons have a knowledge about God. Yes, just about everyone knows about God.

Paul is very accurate to conclude that no one knows God naturally. It is one thing to know about God and something quite different to know God in an intimate relationship. No one can step into a personal, intimate relationship with God. We all are estranged from Him because of our sins. We are His enemies. Unless God “discovers” us, we will never have a right relationship with our Creator. Therefore, like the Galatians, and like all people, we did not know Him. We are rightly described by Paul who wrote, *They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work (Titus 1:16).*

Being separated from God by our sin, we were enslaved to “non-gods.” “Non-gods” are the invention of human wisdom and imagination. They have been around since the creation was permeated with sin. False gods, like their forefather Satan, are intended to take the place of the one true God our Creator. Call them what you will, attribute to them what you wish, they are still no true gods at all. The Old Testament prophets labeled them as fraudulent centuries before

the Galatians served them. Jeremiah described the “non-gods” like this: *for the customs of the peoples are vanity. A tree from the forest is cut down and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good (Jeremiah 10:3-5).* The Greeks invented hundreds of these kinds of gods. The Gentile Galatians knew many non-gods from their years of living in the pagan world. They were as familiar with “non-gods” as our own world is full of would-be gods—objects, ideas, people, and pleasure that our peers make to be their gods.

But that was the way it used to be! *Formerly* we were enslaved to these ideas, lusts, and habits. In other words, at some point we broke free. More accurately, at some point God came and broke the chains that bound us and we were free.

Okay, since that is true, then why return to slavery? *But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? (v.9).* We were delivered from slavery when God **knew** us. While we were in the state of “not able to know God,” God came and made us “known by Him.” To know God or to be known by God is one of the most critical challenges of the Bible. Not to know God the Son results in eternal disaster. Jesus taught that on the day of judgment, *then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matthew 7:23).* Be warned. Not to know God results in fiery judgment. The time will come *when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus (2 Thessalonians 1:7b-8).* Such judgment is reserved for those who lived according to their passions because they did not know God. God’s people do not live *in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God (1 Thessalonians 4:5).*

Obviously, it is a serious danger to be “unknown” by God. Far better to be delivered from such slavery when God takes the initiative

to establish an intimate relationship with us through Christ. If that is the case, then how is it that free people want to return to weak, worthless, elementary principles? That short list sounds like the reminder that we were once enslaved to the “elementary principles” of the world that Paul mentioned in 4:3. In that verse, we concluded that the elementary principles were the conclusions about the basic, elementary, traditions, rituals, ideas that one had to do in order to gain righteousness. Here these basic rituals and ideas are identified as weak and worthless. We already know that from experience! Therefore we might wonder, “Why would a person who God delivered from the bondage of the Roman Catholic Church, or any other humanly created religion, want to go back?”

Did you see what happened in this text? Paul just equated the requirements of Judaism with the religious requirements of paganism. Surely the Galatians would retort, “Oh, but we are not doing that Paul! We don’t want to return to slavery!” Really? In the next couple of verses, Paul gave proof for his accusation that they were doing that (vv.10-11).

The Galatians turned to observing days and such. *You observe days and months and seasons and years! (v.10)*. This is a reference to the various Jewish holidays. Under the law God gave for the nation of Israel, God had required the people to observe special feast days, various new moon rituals, annual feasts, and the year of Jubilee. Those were for the nation, the theocracy. The Judaizers had convinced the Christians in Galatia to observe these kinds of celebrations. And they were indeed *observing* such holidays already. Was this not an indication that they were on their way to full-fledged legalism of being circumcised (though they had not yet)(5:2). The danger was not in being circumcised (which is neither good nor bad) or in celebrating special days (which is neither good nor bad, Romans 14:5-6). The danger was in doing these things in order to obtain righteousness, in an effort to be saved. Observing such rituals will never lead to righteousness any more than modern Americans will gain righteousness simply by attending church services on Easter and Christmas.

In light of the Galatians’ choices, Paul feared his labor was useless. *I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain (v.11)*. Obviously, Paul had invested much labor in the Christians. We know

how he came to their cities, preached, was persecuted. We can imagine how much time he had spent teaching, discipling, counseling, and establishing these people in the faith. Now it appeared it was all for naught.

Do we understand what Paul did and why he concluded what he concluded? Like us when we have poured our lives into someone expending many hours, maybe late hours, maybe even sleepless nights. We long for them to know Christ and to live like they know Christ. But sometimes it doesn’t seem to work. It reminds us of the story of the minister who was talking to his friend the mortician who had once also been a minister. The mortician confessed to his minister friend, “When I was in your line of work, I worked and worked to straighten out old Jim, and six months later he went back to the bottle. I worked for several weeks to straighten out the Smith’s marriage, and then they got divorced anyway. I spend a year trying to straighten out Mr. Jones’s errant theology, and then he went and joined the Mormon church anyway. Now days, when I straighten someone out, they stay straight.”

Did Paul Become the Enemy by Telling the Truth (vv.12-16)?

In the past, the Christians had gladly received Christ’s messenger (vv.12-14). It had been obvious for years that there was a strong bond between the spiritual father and the spiritual children. That is why Paul wrote, *Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong (v.12)*. Now there was conflict but they were still “brothers.” It wasn’t that the people had abandoned the faith. They were just listening to agitators who they should not have been listening to.

So Paul begged them to become like himself. What did he mean by that? He had once been a very devout Jew who was not only zealous for the traditions of the fathers but was enslaved to the rituals of the law. By grace God freed Paul from that bondage. Paul had the utmost confidence of being made righteous through faith in Christ alone. He deeply desired for his brothers and sisters in Galatia to have that same freedom of conscience, that same assurance that they had been freed forever from the curse of the law.

Could they not become as him since he had become like them? In what way did that happen? Paul, though at one time a devout Jew, lived according to the ways of the Gentiles. He had put away those divisive practices that unnecessarily drew lines of distinction between Jews and Gentiles.

How incredibly up-to-date this conflict is. Still there are many unnecessary divisions over liberties and laws, freedom and traditions. There are so many professing Christians who refuse to associate with true believers simply because those believers do not hold to the same traditions and preferences they hold. It is not a matter of the fellow Christian denying cardinal doctrines or abandoning the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. Rather the separation comes down to preferences of practices derived in a secondary application of Scriptural truth. About the time we finally gain a clear conscience to accept and appreciate believers who are not exactly like we are in practice, we run into professing Christians who revel in practices that hinder spiritual growth, practices that smack of the world as opposed to reflecting God's glory. Not only do they practice these things, but they insist that everyone else who claims to be a Christian do the same or at least lend tacit approval on their questionable practices. To say that our patience and desire to be all things to all men is stretched sometimes is an understatement.

These brothers had been very receptive to Paul in the past. There was acceptance in spite of need. He remembered, *You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus (vv.13-14)*. It must be that the people in Galatia were introduced to Paul in difficult circumstances. It was during the first missionary journey. Some believe that Paul contracted some kind of serious disease, like malaria, while he was preaching in the swampy, coastal areas of Pamphylia. In order to recover, he went to the higher plains of Galatia and preached Christ even while he was recovering.

In those circumstances, the people certainly did Paul no wrong (v.12b). Quite the contrary. Though he was in a sickly condition, the people warmly accepted him. Whatever the sickness was, it was not pleasant to be around. That truth is obvious in that Paul confessed that his condition was a *trial* to them. Be that as it may, the folks in

the Galatian cities did not *scorn* Paul (literally - *spit him out*). When he preached at Antioch of Pisidia, the people begged Paul to preach again the next week (Acts 13:42). The next week nearly the whole city showed up to hear the messenger of God (Acts 13:44). Even when the troublemakers ran Paul and company out of town, they would go to another city and find a warm reception there—all through the Galatian region.

Therefore, it is no wonder that Paul wondered what happened to the relationship (vv.15-16). There once was serious mutual commitment. Paul asked, *What then has become of the blessing you felt? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me (v.15)*. It does seem that Paul had some difficulty with his eyes. At the end of this letter he wrote, *“See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand” (Galatians 6:11)*. Maybe that was the bodily ailment he referred to in this text. When he was in that condition, he knew that the people loved him so much that, hypothetically, they would have volunteered to give an eye for a transplant if that had been possible. Where did the love go?

Apparently truth hurts (v.16). *Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth (v.16)?* The truth was that the people were wrong to even give ear to the Judaizers' teaching about gaining salvation by works. They should have rejected the teaching and the teachers. Paying attention to false teaching (even if it is a matter of curiosity) is a serious matter. So Paul told them to quit it. Responding positively when a spiritual authority points out the danger is also a serious matter. It is human nature to be embarrassed or humiliated to discover that you have been guilty of embracing error. But it is fleshly and sinful to insist that the error is acceptable or even good. Sometimes that is an indication that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is absent in a person's life. That was a great concern for Paul in this case.

Paul Was Perplexed About Them (vv.17-20).

He wanted his brothers and sisters in the Galatian churches to know that the real enemy is false teachers (vv.17-18). He warned them that such people have no good purpose for Christ's people. *They*

make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out (v.17a). Apparently, the false teachers fawned over the Galatians. The attention was much appreciated. It generally is. But the apparent concern or love was not genuine. False teachers are masters at making people think they have a good purpose for them, when in reality they use people to achieve their own goals and purposes which are never good.

In reality, the false teachers wanted to shut the Galatians out from God's grace. On one hand, that could mean that the teachers' goal was to keep people who were seeking salvation from obtaining salvation because they would substitute works for God's grace (if that were possible). On the other hand, and most likely, was that the false teachers would succeed in interrupting God's grace to the Christians by making them disobedient to God.

The problem was as old as Satan. In the false teachers' opinion, life is all about them. Paul warned that the reason the false teachers made much of his friends is *that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you (vv.17b-18).* The whole purpose of the false teachers was self-exaltation. The more people who embraced their teaching and came into their fold, the better they looked.

On some level, this same tragedy has been and continues to be repeated throughout history. What did the founders of false religions like Islam, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientology and so on intend to accomplish? No doubt Joseph Smith would be very proud of what has become of his religion. No doubt Mohammed would be delighted to know his religion is sweeping the world. And on a lesser scale, there are dozens of ministers who are building monuments to themselves on the backs of gullible people who trust them.

Conversely, it is good to be made much of for good purposes. Paul made much of the people who trusted Christ through his preaching. God makes much of His own people. But the name of Christ is the only thing that deserves and receives glory in such "making much."

In this case, we see from his letter that the spiritual father loved the children greatly (vv.19-20). Paul was their spiritual father because God used him to bring those people to new life. That is why Paul called them *my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of*

childbirth until Christ is formed in you! (v.19). And like little children do sometimes, those people were trying Paul's patience. Remember what he said in verse eleven, *I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain (v.11).*

Nevertheless, Paul loved them deeply in Christ. How he had anguished over them as they fought sin and Satan, fighting their way into the kingdom. They, like all people who come to Christ by faith, fought the battle for salvation as Christ described it when He taught, *"From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matthew 11:12).* Spiritual warfare is just that – warfare. Becoming the stature and fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13), growing up into Him who is the Head of the Church (Eph. 4:15) is very agonizing at times.

Therefore, Paul was confused about the children's choices. He expressed, *I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you (v.20).* He realized that his tone, conveyed in this letter, was quite direct and rebuking. It needed to be because the people were taking such a perplexing direction in the spiritual warfare.

Paul has painted a very realistic picture of the agitation a spiritual leader experiences in his heart when he sees people into which he has poured his life making spiritually foolish decisions. "What in the world!" is a very common response for you who have evangelized and disciplined someone only to watch them wander off after a false teacher. We do often feel much like Dickens' Mr. Brownlow must have felt when he learned that Oliver was again enslaved to Fagin. Those are the times when we trust God's eternal truth that if the person is truly Christ's sheep, no one will ever be able to snatch him or her out of Christ's hand.