

Illustrating the Gospel¹

Galatians 4:12-5:1

Pastor Tim Nixon

The Anguish Troubling their Relationship

(v.12-20)

Parents will recognize the feelings and the words here. Paul has a deep love for his spiritual children. I heard a mother once say, "When they are little they step on your toes; but when they are grown, they step on your heart."²

Commentators through the centuries have noted the gripping intimacy of these verses, which seem to have been literally wrung from the apostle's heart. In his 1519 Galatians commentary, Luther observed, "These words breathe Paul's own tears."³

The Personal History Uniting Them

(v.12-15)

They have a personal history together that should unite them. He appeals to them to become like he is, free as sons and not enslaved to the old creation. This sentence is meant to connect what he is teaching them in the letter to what he taught them when he was with them.

Paul's appeal to his brothers and sisters in Christ was for them to recognize and live by the spiritual freedom all believers have in God's grace.

He reminds them of their care for him in the midst of his suffering while with them. He seems to be implying that he was with them for a longer time than planned due to some difficulty with his eyes. He was received then in spite of his illness causing difficulty for them. They did not reject him, but rather moved toward him with love and acceptance. They embraced as they would a messenger from God or even as the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, what has happened? Why would those who were then willing to gouge out their eyes for him and counted it a blessing to be with him now refuse to hear and heed him?

The Purposeful Attack Dividing Them

(v.16-17)

Listen to the pain in his voice? Has he now become their enemy because he tells them the truth? Here is a part of the subtle attack trying to divide them. The false teachers were doing two things to cut them off from Paul.

They seemed to have accused Paul of being against the Galatians themselves because he was against what they were being taught. In other words, Paul's attack on error was being construed to be an attack on the people. He was no longer their beloved friend and founder; he was now their enemy.

¹ This manuscript is an adaptation of a sermon written by Pastor Russ Kennedy and preached at Clearcreek Chapel in 2007.

² Warren Wiersbe, *Be Free*, (Victor Books, 1975), 99.

³ Timothy George, *Galatians*, vol. 30, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 319.

They were making much of the Galatians so that they would make much of them. They were enthusiastic and encouraging and praising of the Galatians. They were flattering them in order to manipulate the people in the church. They were playing on the human desire to be approved by people you admire.

The Galatian believers who had yielded to the Judaizing heresy were guilty of spiritual defection. Nothing tears the heart of a faithful pastor as much as seeing someone he has led to the Lord turn away from the faith. How much more does such defection grieve the Lord Himself?

The term translated 'make much' carries the idea of taking a serious interest in someone and was often used of a man courting a woman. "The Judaizers talk like they really care for you," Paul was saying, "but they are false suitors who have no genuine love for or interest in you or your welfare."⁴

The Perplexed Distress Grieving Them (v.18-20)

Yet, he acknowledges that it is a good thing to be admired and approved. It is a good thing when people encourage you and motivate you to continue to grow, learn and change.

But it is a bad thing to act as though there is nothing wrong. It is a dangerous thing to give people moving toward error a false sense of security and wellbeing.

Paul is perplexed over them. *He is like a mother in child birth who thought all was going well, but now some alarming pains have started. They are his beloved little children.* He wishes he could be with them so that he could engage them and hopefully be able to change his tone. But for now, the danger that they will abort and not be truly God's sons is great and grave.

The Judaizers had no interest in the Galatian believers beyond entrapping them in legalism. They were like the scribes and Pharisees to whom Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves."

Here is what it means to truly be a shepherd of God's people. A deep and personal relationship is built over time. When someone attempts to teach error or drive a wedge, there is real pain and perplexity. For the true shepherds, there will be this mix of anguish and anger. Because eternal souls are at stake, there will be a rising tone warning of the danger and the deadliness of turning away from the truth of the gospel and embracing error.

The Analogy Correcting their Error (v.21-27)

Now Paul turns from his relationship with the church as a whole to confronting those who were teaching and falling into error.

⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Galatians, MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 119.

A Strategy to Confront Error

(v.21)

We are given an example of how to deal with those who twist the Scripture to teach error.

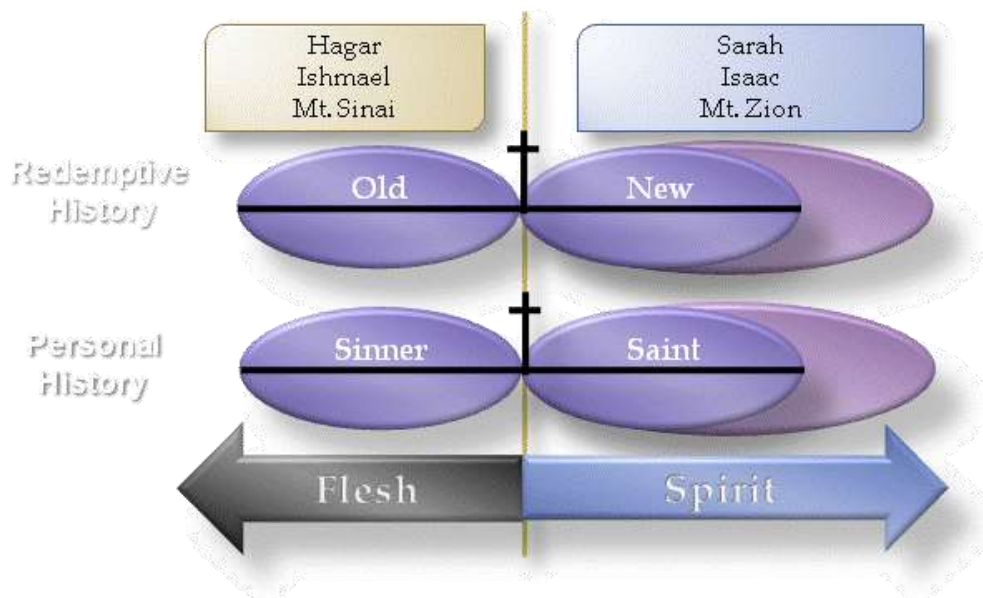
Recognize that what one does flows out of heart beliefs and motivations. He locates their impetus in a desire for law (v.21a). Those who teach error when they have been instructed or confronted with truth are doing so out of a set of heart motivations and desires. He identifies them by this desire to be under the Law. Knowing these motivations helps uncover the hidden agendas and the end game of the error.

A Biblical Argument to Clarify Truth

(v.22-26)

In this text Paul continues to contrast grace and law, faith and works. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit he employs an Old Testament story as an analogy, which serves not so much as an argument, but as an illustration.

What Paul is saying is an example, to be taken figuratively, an explanation and an elaboration on it drawn from this Old Testament narrative.



Look at the slide on the screen as I work through this this with you.

Abraham had two children, Ishmael and Isaac. *Ishmael was born as a result of relying on the ways of the world and thus is born according to the principles of the flesh.*

Isaac is born as a result of faith in the promises of God and thus is born according to the principles of the spirit. Paul shifts however to look at the mothers of these two children. There is little argument that Isaac and Ishmael all through the Bible represent these two realms, the one of the flesh and the other of the Spirit. But Paul goes on to expand that teaching. The illustration can be extended to the mothers. **Hagar represents the realm of the flesh, the fallen order in which Law rules. She is not the recipient of the covenant of promise.** She has good done for her, but she is not the mother of the covenant.

Sarah is the mother of the covenant. She has also been promised descendants and a son. So Hagar represents the realm of the flesh and Sarah the realm of the promise.

But those two also correspond to two mountains, Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. All through the Old Testament, these two mountains are filled with rich and elaborate allusions to truths greater than the physical locations. Mt. Sinai is the place the Law was received and immediately broken. It is there that God talked face-to-face with Moses. There the people hid and fled from the fearsome glory of God. Mt. Zion is usually the heavenly Jerusalem, even in the Old Testament. It is the ultimate dwelling of the glory of God and is the homeland, the promised land per se, for all God's people.

Then Paul does a startling thing. He places Jerusalem in the realm of the flesh, in the trajectory of the Law. Now this would have been shocking to both Jew and Gentile. To the Jew, Jerusalem was the center of their Messianic hopes. To the Gentile Christians, Jerusalem was the location of the mother church. But Paul is making a point here. Remember in chapter two, where had the Judaizers come from? They were from a group *in the church at Jerusalem*. So he is warning them to look to their heavenly promises and graces, not to their earthly Jerusalem. Even though it is the location of the first church, it is not the source nor the mediator of the promise. We do not identify ourselves as citizens of Jerusalem. We are citizens of heaven.

The Biblical Grounds for Interpretation

(v.27)

Now, where does he get that?

Notice, what he says in verse 24-26 is because of what is said in Isaiah 54:1 which he cites here in verse 27.

Isaiah 53 is the great suffering savior text. Immediately following the redeeming work of the Messiah and the promise that His salvation will be to all nations, we get this opening sentence to chapter 54. Who is the barren one? Who is the desolate one with no children? She is Sarah. He reads this text and sees that Isaiah speaks of Sarah as the mother of many children, not just in the tents of Israel, but throughout all people groups. God, through His redeeming work will fulfill His promise to His people and be their God and their husband (v.6-8). God establishes the covenant that brings peace (v.9-10; Romans 5:1). God will rule and reign from the heavenly city with His people gathered therein (v.11-12; Revelation 21-22).

The Assertions Applying the Gospel

(v.28-5:1)

Now he comes to the point of his argument. In doing so he makes 5 assertions that apply the gospel.

We are children of the promise.

(v.28)

Again addressing the Galatian believers as brothers, Paul tells them that, like Isaac, they are children of promise. Every believer, like Isaac, is supernaturally conceived, miraculously born, and the offspring of God's promise to Abraham fulfilled in Christ. Those who have begun to sink back into the trap of legalistic Judaism must remember that they are children of promise, who owe their life not to their own effort but to the miraculous power of God, just as Isaac did in the physical realm. God's sovereign

power of grace gave them life, and to fall back under law was to deny that divine work and to dishonor God.⁵

The flesh and the Spirit are in conflict. (v.29)

Just as Ishmael and Isaac were in conflict, so the realms and principles of the flesh and the Spirit will be in conflict. Those who are still in the old will persecute those who are living by the principles of the new. Paul is saying that the Judiazers are in the flesh, not the Spirit. So, just as the false teachers of their day were in conflict with Paul and all holding to the truth of the Word of God, it is like that in our day. We can simply expect, until Jesus comes, that there will be false teachers who are of the flesh and will glorify the flesh and try to bring people to live or ministry by the principles of the flesh.

Those in the flesh are removed from the household. (v.30)

Hagar and Ishmael were expelled from the household and sent on their way. They were not allowed to stay and cause more trouble. They were sent away as a symbol of their being outside the family and not the true children, not the true heirs.

Unrepentant false teachers are to be silenced and to be removed. They are not to be given a place to confuse people or corrupt what is believed. Paul is calling on the Galatians to remove the Judiazers from fellowship and to identify them as outside the faith. And so must we. While we speak the truth in love among those who are learning and growing, we must not tolerate false doctrine.

We are children of the Spirit and are free. (v.31)

This verse stands as a summary and conclusion not only of the Hagar-Sarah analogy but also of the entire theological argument Paul had developed from 3:1–4:30. The shift in pronouns from the second person plural you of v. 28 to the first person plural we signifies Paul's desire to identify himself with the Galatians whom he again addressed as "my brothers."⁶

Live, love and learn as children of the free woman. **Speak to yourselves over and over again that Christ has set you free.** He has redeemed you from slavery. He has brought you out of Egypt. He has broken the chains and power of Mt. Sinai. He has transferred you into the kingdom of Mt. Zion. Abraham is your spiritual father, Sarah your spiritual mother, Jesus Christ you brother and joint-heir. This is where true spiritual freedom is. The principles of the world, the Law, the flesh will bind you to your sin and have no power to deliver you from your sin.

We must stand in the truths of the gospel. (5:1)

Since we are children of the Spirit and not children of the slave, we must not go back to living under the principles of the fallen world, the realm of sin.

We must not try to live by the Law. We must not minister by the principles of the world. We must not return to old. We are free in the new. Sometimes, returning to the

⁵ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Galatians, MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 127.

⁶ Timothy George, *Galatians, vol. 30, The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 348.

world feels like it is freeing us. This is an illusion. Returning to the world's principles does return us to slavery.

We will arrive safely one day because God has given us His Spirit proving that we are His children and His true heirs.

Conclusion

Learn what the Bible says about who you are in Christ. You cannot stand in what you do not know. Read through the New Testament listening for your identity in Christ. You are a saint, a son, a soldier, a servant, a sheep.

Memorize key texts to repeat often in your heart. Meditate on your identity in Christ. Think about it. Talk about with others. Pray it back to God. Fill your soul with words of affirmation of the truth God has given.

Prize these truths as precious and powerful. You will not hold to and will be influenced much by what you do not prize.

Use these truths to discern and reject error. Be alert to the barrage of worldly principles and methods to try to achieve spiritual maturity and to do spiritual ministry.

Actively reject and refuse what will draw you away from the truth in Christ. Religious bookstores are full of how-to books that are based either on legalism or on secular philosophies and psychologies. Watch out for the latest key to spirituality, holiness fad, psychological insight. Do not become entangled in the slavery.