

Sermon Series: *The Letter of Paul to the Galatians*

Don't Turn Back To Slavery

Galatians 4:8-11 (ESV)

8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.

9 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?

10 You observe days and months and seasons and years!

11 I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

Introduction

Paul continues his appeal to the Galatian believers not to embrace legalism. Legalism is an understanding that merit with God is earned based upon outward and physical actions, duties, and deeds. In short, salvation is earned by obeying the law.

As you recall, the Galatians had allowed to come in, after Paul had departed from them, false teachers who had begun to teach that keeping the Mosaic law (Gal 3:1-5) and receiving circumcision (Gal 5:2) was **necessary** in order to be justified before God (i.e. in order to be saved). This was no doubt taught under the auspices of “getting back to the basics.” Yet Paul sees what is really happening—by these Gentile believers embracing the dictates of the Mosaic law, they were turning away from salvation by grace through faith in Jesus. They had begun the slide of thinking that rather than salvation being dependent upon believing God to keep His promise, they were beginning to think that salvation was dependent upon the own actions.

Paul has argued that justification is by faith alone in Jesus alone. He then argued that salvation by faith in Jesus is far superior to life under the law. Paul continues to do everything he can to keep the Galatians from turning away from Jesus because he knows if they do, they will do so to their own destruction. Paul does three things in these four verses. He gives them...

1. A Reminder of the reality of their past condition
2. A refresher on their present condition
3. A warning regarding their future condition

A Reminder of the Reality of Their Past Condition

Galatians 4:8 (ESV)

8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.

Paul reminds them of the reality of their past condition. He reminds them of what life was like before they had heard the gospel of Jesus. He notes two facts; first, before Christ **they did not know God** and second, they were **enslaved to those who are not gods**.

Reminder of Their Past Condition: 1) You Did Not Know God

“Formerly, you did not know God.” Before Paul came and preached the gospel of Jesus to them, **they did not know God**. Paul clearly stated in the opening paragraphs of this letter that what he had preached to them was *the gospel of Jesus Christ*. Remember how astonished he was and how he pronounced a curse upon these false teachers who were twisting the gospel of Jesus, which is a gospel of grace, into a non-gospel.

Galatians 1:6-9 (ESV)

6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—

7 not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

9 As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

The reason this is so significant is because it is only through the gospel of Jesus that anyone can truly know God. There is no other soul-saving gospel than the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified, then raised from the dead on the third day, who then ascended into heaven and is there reigning at the right hand of God this very day!

The means to knowing God comes only by embracing and receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ by faith. For it is in receiving the gospel that we met Jesus Himself and He gives us His own Holy Spirit. This is the process of adoption that removes us from being under God’s wrath and then brings us into the family of God, thus allowing us to know God. Without faith in Jesus no one can know God.

John 1:18 (ESV)

18 No one has ever seen God: the only God, who is at the Father’s side, He has made Him known.

Jesus, whom John calls “God, who is at the Father’s side,” is the one who has made known the God the Father. In the person of Jesus, God the Father is revealed to the world.

John 14:6b (ESV)

No one comes to the Father except through Me.

If anyone wants to know God, then the pathway is through Jesus alone.

John 14:8-11 (ESV)

8 Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.”

9 Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, Show us the Father?”

10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.”

God dwelled in Jesus so completely that Jesus could say, “If you have seen me, then you have seen the Father.” The only way to know God is through the person of Jesus. Before receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ, **they did not know God**. This is the first fact of their past condition that Paul reminded them of.

Reminder of Their Past Condition: 2) Enslaved To Those Who Are Not gods

Not only did they not know God, but they were **enslaved to those who by nature are not gods**. Not knowing the true God is not spiritual neutrality—it’s spiritual slavery. Living life apart from the knowledge of God is not freedom, it is bondage. Failing to know the one true God leads to slavery to those who are “not gods,” or false gods.

Both Jews & Gentiles Were Slaves Before Faith

Paul understands both Jews and Gentiles to exist in a state of slavery prior to receiving the gospel and embracing Jesus. All persons who are apart from Jesus Christ are living under a state of spiritual slavery (cf. Gal 3:22; Rom 3:9). There is no true freedom except through faith in Jesus. Jews living under the law are slaves of the law (Gal 3:23; 4:1, 5) and Gentiles living without the law are slaves to sin (Rom 6:16-17). In this verse Paul explains that the source of that slavery is **those who by nature are not gods**.

Paul obviously has in mind polytheistic idolatry common among Gentiles. There were dozens of Greek & Roman gods ubiquitous in the culture. Statues of the gods were everywhere. Remember Paul’s experience walking down the streets of Athens. He reported that the “city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16). They had idols to every god under the sun (and maybe even one to the sun as well) and just in case they missed one, they even had an idol set up with this inscription, “To the unknown god” (Acts 17:23).

These idols of stone or wood were actually not gods at all. They were simply images created by men and worshiped as a god. But these were **by nature not gods** at all. They were by nature stone or wood or whatever material from which they were made. They were “not gods.” And yet the people who worshipped them were enslaved to them. They were enslaved to them because they thought these hand-crafted images were actually deities, but they were not.

1 Cor 8:4 (ESV)

4 Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that an idol has no real existence, and that there is no God but one.

5 For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many gods and many lords—

6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

The idols that are worshipped by many around the world, are not gods. There is no spiritual life in them. They are mute rocks or statues.

Psalms 135:16-17 (ESV)

16 They have mouths, but do not speak;

*they have eyes, but do not see;
17 they have ears, but they cannot hear,
not is there any breath in their mouths.*

Standing Behind Dumb Idols Are Demons

However, standing behind those mute and dumb idols are demons. Though in physical reality what they claimed to be gods were actually “not gods,” yet standing behind those physical images were demons, who are spiritually real, yet even they are “not gods.”

1 Cor 10:20 (ESV)

...what pagans sacrifice [to idols] they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons.

We dare not ignore the reality of demons. This is why there appears to be real power behind inanimate idols.

I Don't Like the Buddha Watching Me

We have been hosting international students in our home for about eight years. We noticed that the more than half of our Asian students would sleep with the light on. There was one student that I was closer to than others, so I asked her why this was. And she said, “In many of the rooms of our house is the [statue of] the Buddha. When I go to sleep, I feel like he is watching me. I don't like it, so I sleep with the light on and sometimes I cover his face and then I feel better.”

In one sense she was enslaved. Now, we did not have an image of the Buddha in her room, nor anywhere in our house, however, she still lived under that fear that she was being watched while she slept and so by habit she continued to sleep with the light on.

The Gospel Frees From Slavery

Knowing the gospel can set people free from this kind of slavery and much worse. For in the gospel we learn that because Jesus died and rose from the dead, He now possesses more power than any demon. He is now even more powerful than death itself.

Matthew 28:18 (ESV)

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to [Jesus].

Jesus now possesses all authority in physical and spiritual universe. There is no demon that can thwart His will. No demon can do what Jesus commands He not do.

John 13:13 (ESV)

All things have been given into My [i.e. Jesus'] hands. (See also Mt 11:27; Jn 3:35; 17:2;)

1 Cor 15:27 (ESV)

God has put all things in subjection under [Jesus'] feet. (See also Ps 8:6; Eph 1:22)

Every demon and every idol on planet earth are “in subjection under the feet of Jesus.”

Ephesians 1:20-21 (ESV)

20 [God] worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

This is the staggering truth of the gospel. Jesus is freedom from sin and freedom from the power of demons and freedom from worshipping a stone (or influence, or popularity, or fame, or money, or electronics, or hobby, or another person) that has no power to change anything in this world. Jesus is freedom from the condemnation of the law because He has completely fulfilled the law. In Jesus is freedom from all things by which people are enslaved. And so we can hear the shock in Paul's voice as he writes, in verse 10

Galatians 4:9 (ESV)

9 How can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?

Paul is utterly aghast at the possibility that these Galatians can even be considering embracing legalism, for in so doing they would be returning to the slavery of their former life. You will also recall that the word translated "principles" can also be translated as "spirits" and so Paul may have in mind the demonic connection with who all idol worship.

The words "weak" and "worthless" have in English a nice poetic ring, however, translated literally they mean "powerless" and "bankrupt." Some translations read "weak and beggarly" (e.g. KJV). Paul is unable to grasp how these Galatians, who have experienced the power of God in their salvation, could even contemplate turning back to the law as a means of earning God's favor.

He cannot fathom how they would turn away from the rich inheritance that comes through Jesus and embrace a bankrupt system of belief that will only fill their souls with spiritual poverty.

They were giving up the power of the Gospel for the weakness of Law, and the wealth of the Gospel for the poverty of Law. The Law never made anybody rich or powerful; on the contrary, the Law could only reveal man's weakness and spiritual bankruptcy. No wonder Paul weeps over these believers, as he sees them abandon liberty for bondage, power for weakness, and wealth for poverty.¹

"Turning Back" by Embracing Days, Months, Seasons, & Years

Paul gives one example of a way in which this turning back was demonstrated. He specifically points out their observance of **days, months, seasons, and years** (v.10).

Galatians 4:10 (ESV)

10 You observe days and months and seasons and years!

Apparently Paul had received word that these Galatian Gentile believers were in the process of implementing a new church calendar. In fact, they were instituting an old Jewish calendar that was new to them. The Gentile believers were beginning to observe the old Mosaic calendar.

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996), Ga 4:8.

They were observing the day-long feasts, the celebrations that took place at the beginning of each new month, the feasts and festivals that lasted longer than one day (i.e. seasons and years). Paul says that doing this was turning away from Christ and back to bondage.

So is it wrong for us to celebrate special days, Christmas, New Year's day, Easter celebration and so on? I don't think it is because Paul did not stop celebrating these Jewish holidays when He believed in Jesus. (Jesus is a Jew and Paul did not stop being a Jew when he became a Christian.) The problem is not *that* a certain day is celebrated as religiously significant, but the problem comes from how it is celebrated.

If the observing of these religious days is thought to make one more righteous in the eyes of God, then that is the problem. If keeping these days, months, seasons, and years is thought to earn one merit before God, then there is no longer a reliance upon the righteousness of Jesus, there is a reliance upon human effort. This has been Paul's whole point, righteous comes by faith, not by works.

Isaiah cuts right to the point. If in your heart you enjoy persistent disobedience of God, then participating in religious services will not earn you any bonus points with God.

Isaiah 1:13-14

*13 Bring no more vain offerings;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—
I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.
14 Your new moons and your appointed feasts
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.*

*15 When you spread out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.*

*16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,*

*17 learn to do good;
seek justice,
correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow's cause.*

*18 "Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.*

Attending a Christmas Eve candle light service is a wonderful service of worship if one comes to glorify God for sending His only Son, Jesus, into the world to save sinners. However, attending such a service will never add righteousness to anyone. God is not tracking attendance of religious services so that He can give eternal life to those who have the highest attendance. Living as if He does brings one under a curse. This is Paul's whole point about the curse of law. God expects perfect attendance so, according to this line of thinking, if you miss one service you have no right to eternal life.

Paul does not want the Galatians to live under that kind of condemnation and spiritual slavery. Attending special services is fine as long as it is done with the right attitude of the heart, knowing that such attendance does not earn one greater righteous in the eyes of God.

Paul has reminded the Galatians of the reality of their past condition. In the past, they did not know God, and they were slaves to idols and demons who are "not gods." There is only one true God and He is the Father of Jesus. Turning back and embracing legalistic Judaism means turning back to slavery and away from freedom.

After reminding them of their past condition, he refreshes their memory about their present condition.

A Refresher on Their Present Condition

Galatians 4:9

9 *But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again...*

Know By God

Paul contrasts the inferiority of their past condition over against the superiority of their present condition. **Now, they have come to know God.** Paul uses the verb *ginōskō* means, "to know intimately and on a personal level."² The kind of knowledge Paul was referring to was personal and not merely factual. They had come to know God since they had received "the Spirit of His Son into their hearts" (Gal 4:6).

This adds to Paul's astonishment. How could the children turn away from their gracious Father? They didn't know God like they knew the sun was in the sky. They knew God because they had experienced the power of His working in their hearts. They were no longer slaves. They had been adopted as sons and daughters (Gal 4:7).

Paul then immediately clarifies the source of their knowledge. He says, "you have come to know God," then he corrects himself and says with more clarity, "or **rather, to be known by God.**" The shift from the active to the passive voice, indicates that in fact, God is the initiator of this relationship. God chose to know these Galatians, thus their knowledge of God came about as a result of God's prior choice to know them.

² Frank E. Gaebel, Everett F. Harrison, W. Harold Mare et al., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 10: Romans Through Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 476.

This obviously means much more than simple factual knowledge. God chose to know them in a personal and saving way. He chose to establish a saving relationship with them and through His initiation, the result is that they **came to know God**. They knew God only because God first chose to know them.

This of course happened through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus. This is an example of the doctrine of election which is intended to bring believers great comfort and God great glory.

Ephesians 1:3-7 (ESV)

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,

4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love

5 he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,

6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,

The love of God for all people who will put their faith in Jesus extends further back in time than creation itself. Who could turn back from such a love? God's intention to grant those who trust in Jesus "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" was determined before God even founded this world. Who could turn back from such wonderful blessings? God determined to adopt wicked children whom He knew in advance would murder His own Son and yet, He showed them glorious grace. Who could turn back from such a God?

Paul is so shocked that these Galatians were turning back from such a God. After reminding of their present condition, he offers a warning about their future condition.

A Warning Regarding Their Future Condition

Galatians 4:11

11 I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

He is saying, "Maybe you Galatians never truly understood the gospel. Maybe I just thought you understood the gospel, but perhaps I preached and labored among you in vain. Perhaps all I told you about Jesus was for nothing. If you truly understood the love of God for you demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, how could you then turn back and walk away from this love?"

We often need to be reminded of this deep and amazing love of God. We so often forget where we come from. It is so easy to miss the blessing of where we are today. And the world is so busy that we never pause long to consider where we are headed.

Remember where you came from.

Take note of where you are today.

Consider where your life is headed.

Are you today on a path of obedience to Jesus? Or are you in the pathway that leads to destruction? If you know God today, then praise Him because the only reason you know Him, is that He first decided to know you.