

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

Is Christ Formed In You?

Galatians 4:12-20 (ESV)

12 *Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong.*

13 *You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first,*

14 *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.*

15 *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.*

16 *Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?*

17 *They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.*

18 *It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you,*

19 *my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!*

20 *I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.*

How the Enemy Works

If you learn nothing else from this letter Paul wrote to the Galatians, then you should learn something about how the enemy works against the people of God. He always seeks to...

1. to destroy personal relationships that have been forged through faith,
2. to draw away loyalty from Christ to men,
3. and whenever truth is embraced, he quickly rushes in and seeks to subtly twist that truth so that the embrace cannot be sustained.

The Enemy Destroys Personal Relationships

We see this happening among the believers in Galatia. The false teachers, who are tools in the hand of Satan, have come in behind Paul teaching that faith is not enough to sustain a relationship with God. It is necessary to be circumcised and keep the Mosaic law. They have also disparaged Paul (by saying that Paul did not teach the whole truth because he failed to tell the Galatians that they had to keep the law) and thus they have damaged the relationship between Paul and the believers in Galatia.

The enemy always seeks to “destroy” the relationships among believers, i.e. God’s people (John 10:10). His goal is to divide the people of God. Initially the Galatians responded to Paul with acceptance, receptivity, and great joy. They welcomed both Paul and the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, now, at the time Paul was writing this letter (which would have been about a year after his visit) the Galatians were turning away from both Paul and the gospel that he preached, which meant that they were turning away from Jesus Himself. These false teachers had successfully driven a wedge between Paul the new Christians in Galatia. The devil was destroying their relationship.

The Enemy Draws Away Loyalty From Christ To Man

We also see Satan at work through these false teachers as they were drawing away the people's loyalty to Christ and to Paul. They were drawing them away from a dependance upon the work of Christ and to a dependency upon their own works (v.17). And they were seeking to draw the peoples affection away from Paul and to themselves.

These false teachers were seeking to exalt themselves in the eyes of the people so that the people "might make much of them." Their aim was to draw away the praise of the people from the gospel of grace through faith in Jesus and onto themselves. These false teachers were motivated by the praise of man.

The Enemy Twists the Truth

Thirdly, we learn that when a person embraces the truth, the enemy quickly works to twist that truth so that the embrace cannot be maintained. The Galatian believers embraced the truth of the gospel of Jesus that Paul preached. They believed the message of the gospel **by faith** and their lives were transformed. However, it wasn't long until the false teachers were coming in and twisting the gospel into a non-gospel (Gal 1:7)—into a gospel so-called that was not a gospel that could save them.

Jesus warned us that this was the habit of the enemy. In the Parable of the Sower¹ Jesus teaches that as soon as the word of God is heard, the devil comes in and attempts to snatch it away (Lk 8:12). I suspect every time you hear the truth of God's word and embrace that truth and seek to be obedient by putting it into practice, you will soon find the enemy hard at work to twist that truth so that it becomes difficult to hold onto.

He quickly rushes in, but the twisting is slow and subtle. His goal is not to make you let go completely, but to so twist the truth that you have to adjust your grip a little bit here and a little bit there, until finally what you cling to becomes so different from what you originally embraced that you are no longer holding on to the truth at all, but you're simply clinging to a counterfeit, a cheap look-a-like.

This is what was happening in the churches in Galatia. The enemy was hard at work seeking to destroy the newly implanted faith of these tender young believers. He came in and tweaked the gospel a little bit here and a little bit there until finally the Galatians were not believing in the gospel at all. There clinging fast to religion, but not to Christ and there is an eternity of difference between Jesus and religion. So we had better pay close attention to the tactics of the devil. God does not want us to be ignorant of the schemes of the devil, but prepared so that we can stand against them (Eph 6:11).

A Personal Shift

In this letter thus far, Paul has been arguing strongly in order to correct the doctrinal error that the Galatians were in the process of falling into. He has been trying to undo what the devil, through these false teachers, were in the process of doing. His tone has been very doctrinal and theological. His emphasis has been very academic and impersonal.

¹ Mt 13, Mk 4, Lk 8.

However, as we come to these verses this morning, his tone completely changes and from this point on his tone becomes very pastoral and personal and pleading. From this point on, Paul moves away from classical argumentation and more into a posture of exhortation. Paul loves these people and he pours out his heart to them.

We can break the passage into two sections. First, verses 12-16 focus on the **people's past relationship with Paul**. The second section, verses 17-20, focuses on **Paul's present relationship to the people**.

The People's Past Relationship With Paul (v.12-16)

Brothers, I Entreat You

Let's look at verse 12.

Galatians 4:12 (ESV)

12 Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are.

We see some of Paul's tenderness toward these disobedient believers in the word **brothers**. The Greek word *adelphos* could be translated "brothers and sisters" since the word refers to all siblings within a family. Paul speaks to them as members of his own family.

He writes, **I entreat you**. Paul is *pleading* with them. This can be translated, "I beg you..." (NAS). Paul earnestly desires them to change their current direction. They are moving away from the truth and away from Christ, so Paul now begs them to hear his words and consider deeply his command.

Become As I Am

What is he asking them to do? What sort of command is this? Verse 12 contains the first imperative in the letter, **"Become as I am."** What does Paul mean by this? In what way does Paul want these Galatian Gentile believers to become like him? Well, to answer that, we need only ask, what has been the message of the letter thus far?

- Don't turn away from Jesus (Gal 1:6). To turn to any other gospel than the one Paul originally preached was to turn away from Jesus Himself!! Become like Paul, *remain faithful to Jesus and not to an external form of religion*.
- Don't turn away from the gospel of grace. In Jesus we come to God through grace. A relationship with God is a gift of grace. No one deserves the gift of knowing God, and yet in His grace Jesus offers Himself to us. Become like Paul *rejoice* in this grace (Gal 1:6), *remain* in this grace.
- Don't have confidence in your own religious efforts. Become like Paul and put "no confidence in the flesh" (Phil 3:3). Paul knew he could never be justified by his own keeping of the law (Gal 2:16). No one is saved by human effort. Salvation comes as a result of faith alone.
- Don't rejoice in your own works, but rejoice that adoption into the family of God is through receiving the Holy Spirit (Gal 4:6) whom God gives as a gracious gift to all who have faith in Jesus. Become like Paul, enjoy the freedom that comes by being adopted by God through faith in Jesus and not by attempting to earn that gift by obedience to the law (Gal 3:29).

Paul is saying, **"Become like me, because I was once like you."** Paul is inviting them to enjoy the same freedom from that law that he enjoyed, though he was a Jew. He is qualified to offer this invitation

because he knew what bondage it was to live life under the law. Paul is saying, “Do not attempt to be justified by works. You cannot do it. You will never be good enough! Do not attempt to earn your salvation. I have tried that and it does not work. I used to live like you are now living but I gave it up because it is unbearable. You cannot earn your salvation by keeping the Jewish calendar and receiving circumcision.”

Life under the law (as a means of justification) is unbearable. This was Peter’s conclusion in Acts 15 as the disciples were trying to decide if adhering to the Mosaic law was a requirement for Gentiles who wanted to be saved. Peter said that forcing the Gentiles to keep the law would be “...placing a yoke on their necks that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10). Living life under the perfection which the law demands, is perfectly unbearable.

You Did Me No Wrong Then, Why Treat Me As An Enemy Now?

Paul’s mind then goes back to when he first met them. It is as though he is recalling his own conduct when he was among them. “Remember my life when I was with you. Remember how I lived my life when I was among you.² You did me no wrong (v.13) then, but why are you now treating me like an enemy— because I am telling you the truth?” (v. 16) Telling people the truth is always a risky business. Even when you do it in love, sometimes they turn and treat you like an enemy.

So Paul reminds them of what brought him to them originally. Paul is comparing the Galatian’s conduct toward him when he *first* preached to them, with their conduct toward him *now* following the coming of these Judaizers.³ He reminds them that he came to them ***because of a bodily ailment***.

Preaching Because of a Bodily Ailment

Galatians 4:13-14

13 You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first,
14 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.

Evidently the reason Paul spent so much time in the region of Galatia was because he became sick. Either he went into this region to recuperate from his illness or because he was ill he stayed in the region longer than he had planned.⁴ Paul contracted some sort of illness and so while he was recovering, he spent time preaching to the people of Galatia.

Paul’s point in bringing this up to them is to get them to think about the reasons for the difference in their response to him. They had accepted him in the beginning and now they were rejecting him. What was the reason for this swing in response to Paul? They had every reason for rejecting him in the first place, but they did not reject him. So why were they rejecting him now?

² Paul writes similarly in 1 Thessalonians 2:5-10.

³ Richard N. Longenecker, vol. 41, *Word Biblical Commentary : Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 190.

⁴ Richard N. Longenecker, vol. 41, *Word Biblical Commentary : Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 191.

An Unpleasant Illness

They accepted him despite his unpleasant illness. Paul remembers that his **condition was a trial** to them. Paul does not reveal exactly what His condition was, but whatever it was, it was a trial to them. Literally the phrase says, the “illness was your temptation in my flesh.”⁵

Tempted To Reject The Sick Messenger

In other words, the Galatians were tempted to reject Paul because of his sickness. This is not surprising. It was the case then and is often still the case today that we assume that if you are sick then you are being punished by God. This assumption was shared by both Jews and Gentiles.

Who Sinned, This Man or His Parents?

Remember that the disciples once passed a man who was born blind and they asked Jesus, “*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*” (John 9:2). Jesus answered, “*It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him*” (John 9:3). Then Jesus healed the man. This poor man was not born blind because he was being punished by God. He was born blind so that he could bring glory to God!! The Jews viewed physical weakness as a sign, not of God’s favor, but of His disfavor. So did the Gentiles.

From Murderer to “god”

When Paul was shipwrecked on the island of Malta, after coming ashore, Paul was building a fire. He picked up a bundle of sticks and among them was a viper which bit him on the hand. The villagers who witnessed this said, “*No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live*” (Acts 28:4).

Paul shook off the creature into the fire. The people waited to see what would happen to Paul. They expected him to swell up and fall down dead, but neither of these things happened. So after seeing nothing bad happen to them, “*they changed their minds and said he was a god*” (Acts 28:6). They believed that bad things happen to bad people. Paul was bitten by a snake therefore he must be a bad man. But God used that “bad” experience to demonstrate that God had hand of favor on Paul.

Whatever Paul’s symptoms, the Galatian people were tempted to “**scorn and despise**” him. These are very intense words. **Scorn** means, 1: open dislike and disrespect or derision often mixed with indignation, 2: an expression of contempt or derision, 3: an object of extreme disdain, contempt, or derision : something contemptible.⁶

Despise is a synonym and means, “to look down on with contempt or aversion; to regard as negligible, worthless, or distasteful.”⁷ In the Greek this verb (ἐκπτύω, *ekptyo*) translated despise, literally means “spit out,” both as a gesture of disrespect and as a means of protection against the evil eye or demons.”⁸

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Eleventh ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Richard N. Longenecker, vol. 41, *Word Biblical Commentary : Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 192.

NOTE: Jesus spat on the ground in John 9 and made mud by which he healed the eyes of the man born blind (Jn 9:6).

Some have made the connection at this point with Paul's "thorn in the flesh," which he said was a "messenger of Satan" (2 Cor 12:7). If the Galatians were tempted to view Paul's illness as a result of demonic activity or "displeasure of the gods," according to their pre-conversion thinking, then it truly was a miracle that they listened to Paul at all. At some level, it seems that Paul would not have been surprised if they would have rejected him due to his illness. Yet by the grace of God they did not reject him, but they listened to the sick man's preaching.

Received As An Angel

However, they not only listened to him, Paul said they **received him as a angel of God and even as Jesus Himself**. They treated Paul with the utmost respect. They treated him as if he were Jesus Himself. They did not simply receive him, they welcomed him and embraced him with open arms. This warm reception that they originally gave him then gives rise to Paul's complete shock at their present rejection of him and his gospel (which is really God's gospel, cf. Gal 1:11-12).

Galatians 4:15

15 *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.*

What Happened To the Blessing?

Paul reminds them of the blessing that they received when they believed the gospel through his preaching. God blessed them when they received the gospel of Jesus through Paul's preaching. Now that sense of blessing had departed, but for what reason? Paul wants them to think about why that blessing has now gone? For what reason did their sense of blessing depart?

"Formerly our relationship was one of blessing. You were blessed as a result of my preaching the gospel to you and you believed it by faith and God blessed you through me. Why then have you now turned from me and view me as your enemy? I am I really that bad?" The answer is no he was not, but there was a spiritual battle going on here and Paul wanted them to think hard about this in order to discover the source. And he is forcing them to remember their previous relationship with him in order to jog their memories.

If Possible, You Would Have Gouged Out Your Eyes

Paul says that the Galatians were so blessed by him that they would have "**gouged out their eyes and given them to him.**" This can be taken in two ways. It could be that poor eyesight was the bodily ailment he referred to or it could be a phrase demonstrating how valuable Paul had become to the Galatians.

Was the Bodily Ailment Failing Eyesight?

This could mean that Paul's illness was related to failing eyesight. If his eyesight was diseased then the one thing that he would have needed most was new eyes, and the people loved him so much that they were willing to pluck out their own eyes and give them to him.

There is support for this interpretation. In **Gal 6:11** Paul says, "*See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.*" If his eyesight was the source of his physical problem, then this could mean that the size of the script he was writing was large since his vision was impaired. You will also

recall that at his conversion he was blind for three days (Acts 9:9, 17-18). As a result, there may have been some subsequent physical damage to the eyes.

There was also the occasion when Paul was standing trial before the Sanhedrin and when he testified that he had lived his life “*before God in all good conscience*” the high priest commanded those who stood beside Paul to strike him on the mouth (Acts 23:1-2). Paul then said, “*God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?*” Those who stood by said, “*Would you revile God’s high priest?*” And Paul said, “*I did not know he was the high priest...*”

It would have been easy enough to distinguish the high priest from all others priests because of what he wore. His robes would have revealed who he was. Unless Paul had poor eyesight and was not able to see him.

An Expression of the Deepest Affection?

However, the phrase, “*if possible you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me,*” could also simply describe how valuable Paul had become to them. It would be equivalent today to saying, “*You loved me so much you would have given me the shirt off your back!*” (Though this phrase costs much less to fulfill.) The eyes then would indicate a most valued possession, but small in comparison to what was gained by the Galatians through the preaching of Paul—i.e. the salvation of their souls!

Paul then asks, “*Have things changed so much that I have now become your enemy, because I am telling you the truth? Do you now hate me because I am correcting your error?*” And so he shifts now from reminding the people of their past relationship with him TO Paul’s present relationship to the people.

Paul’s Present Relationship With the People (v. 17-20)

Paul’s thinking now shifts away from discussing the people’s former relationship to him to his present relationship with them. He points out the source of the change in the relationship. The only thing that has changed since Paul last visited the Galatians has been the intrusion of these false teachers. The Judaizers who have crept in after Paul left town are the ones who have “sown the seeds of discord among the brothers.” Sowing seeds of discord among God’s people are one of the seven things that God hates (Prov. 6:16-19).

Paul cuts to the heart of the issue with these false teachers. They love the praise of man.

Galatians 4:17

17 They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.

Paul knows the tactics of such false teachers. They come in with smooth and flattering words “making much of you,” but for no good reason. They praise you and tell you how wonderful and intelligent you are, but they have no good motive. Their motive is to “shut you out,” which literally (the verb ἐκκλείω) “means to ‘shut off’ or ‘exclude’ in the sense of withdrawing from or forbidding fellowship with someone.”⁹

⁹ Richard N. Longenecker, vol. 41, *Word Biblical Commentary : Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 194.

They were seeking to “shut them out” from whom? Whom did they desire the Galatians to be “excluded” from? Apparently the aim of their exclusion was the man writing the letter. These false teachers wanted the Galatians shut off from Paul’s influence. They did not want them to have anything to do with Paul. They wanted them “shut out”¹⁰ from Paul’s preaching.

Why? What was the reason for this desire? It was because they wanted the Galatians to “make much of them!” These false teachers wanted the praise of the Galatians but the Galatians kept talking about how great Paul was. So they aimed to shut them off from Paul so that they could receive all the praise of the Galatians.

Galatians 4:18

18 It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you,

This verse is a bit hard to understand, but it appears Paul is saying that making much of those who have been used by God to be a blessing in your life is good, and it is good to remember them and praise God’s use of them in your life even when they are not present. Perhaps Paul is grieved that the Galatians thought so little of him that they failed to defend his ministry in the presence of these false teachers. This triggers a desire in Paul to be present with them.

Galatians 4:19-20

19 my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!

20 I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

This sounds like the heart of a father that is breaking over the fruitless wanderings of immature children. In my reading this morning, I came across **Psalms 16:4** which says, *The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply.* Paul’s heart is breaking for these Galatians whom he loves dearly.

He says, “*I am in the anguish of childbirth...*” Paul likens himself to a mother in the pains of labor until Christ is fully formed in you. Their faith in Jesus is going through an agonizing trial. Paul says, “I wish I could be with you so I could change my tone. He wishes he didn’t have to be so stern with them. He wishes they more fully trusted in Jesus. He wishes their maturity in Christ was more fully developed.

You may find yourself in one of these struggles of faith today. Life has many struggles that may tempt us to doubt God. Do not allow anyone or anything to pull you away from Christ. In these deepest moments of struggle, Paul’s desire was that he could be with them. He wanted to be present with them to help them through by pointing them back to Jesus. Remember His grace. Remember His love. Remember His power. Don’t let the enemy pull you away from fellowship with God’s people when you are struggling in your faith.

This is a question we need to ask ourselves, “Is Christ fully formed in you?”

¹⁰ There may also be a play on words here since this phrase is similar in structure to Paul’s reference to the whole world being “shut up under sin.” If this is the mind of Paul he may also mean that the false teachers were attempting to “shut out” the Galatians from grace in order to keep them locked up under the bondage of the law. See Frank E. Gaebeline, 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), 480.

Application

1) Identify With Those To Whom You Share the Gospel

Strive to identify with those to whom you witness. In order to be an effective witnesses for Jesus you must do your best to identify with the people to whom you are witnessing. Paul was able to say to the Galatians, “I have been where you are and so I can tell you that where I am is a more desirous place to be. I’ve been where you are. Please come to Jesus and stand where I am today!”

2) Stop Arguing & Start Pleading

There are times when pleading is necessary. When you see a person heading down a path to destruction, certainly it is appropriate to state the facts (as Paul has done these first four chapters). However, there come a time when you need to stop arguing (in the classical sense) and start pouring out your heart. Paul begs the Galatians not to embrace legalism. He pleads with them not to turn away from grace. There will be times in our dealings with people, when pleading will be appropriate.

3) Do Not Begrudge Bodily Ailments

Do not begrudge God for using sickness and illness as an occasion for sharing the gospel. There will be times in life when God will lay us down for a season. Paul plainly states that it was because of a “bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you.” Simply because you are sick or ill does not mean you will no longer be used by God to bring Him glory. There are times when God uses sickness for His good purposes. It was because of sickness that Paul preached the gospel to the Galatians. We need to be open to the Lord using us in a similar way.

4) An Ugly Messenger May Have a Beautiful Message

We should also be aware that God often uses unpleasant messengers to speak to us. Paul’s physical condition was extremely unpleasant to deal with. The Galatians were tempted to reject him. They might easily have concluded that he was cursed by God or at least under the discipline of God. But they didn’t they listened to him long enough to hear the truth of God in what Paul preached. Are we that patient? Do you assume that God can only speak through healthy, well-groomed, eloquent spokesmen? Or are you open to God speaking to you through a poor traveler, with a disgusting disease?

5) Be On Guard Against Slander

Don’t allow other people to alter the affection you hold in your heart for a friend without having a conversation about it to find out if what is being said is true. The Galatians allowed the false teachers to speak falsely about Paul without challenging the lies they told. They tolerated the lies long enough until they began to believe that they were true. A godly person will not tolerate slander (Ps 15:3; Pr 6:17 God hates a lying tongue).

6) Be Wary of Those Who Want Your Praise

Be on guard against the person who seeks to draw you into a dependency upon them. One of the perpetual sins of humanity is a desire for the praise of people. False teachers always desire to gain a great following by shutting people out from the input of others and keeping people locked up under their own teaching. They do this to draw your praise onto themselves and away from praising Jesus. They are zealous for their own glory. False teachers always want you to make much of them rather than making much of Jesus.

7) Being Present Through the Birth Pains

There are times we go through agonizing situations so that Christ would be fully formed in us. We, at times, go through spiritual contractions both for our own spiritual growth and for that of others. We are frequently in “birth pains,” as it were, yearning for the spiritual transformation of our own souls and for those around us whom we love. When we are in those moments, our desire is to be with them. Paul desired to be present with the Galatians. He wanted to be with them. All three times I stood beside Alisa as she was giving birth to each of our children, all I could do was hold her hand and speak words of comfort to her. I could do nothing physical to help. I could only be near her. There may be people in your life who are right now going through the agony of spiritual transformation. Be near them. Be present with them. Stand beside them and pray for them. Pray that Christ would be formed within them and pray that Christ would be fully formed in your own heart.