

Lesson 16 – Galatians 4:8-11

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Review/Introduction

Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

Paul is writing to the Galatian churches who are in danger of abandoning justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. He is correcting the heresy of the Judaizers who are disturbing the Galatians with a different, distorted gospel, which is really not another since there is only one gospel of Christ.

Paul has presented the authentication of the Gospel through the source (God) and its power to change lives (persecutor/murderer to preacher). That same authentication is true for the follower of Christ today.

In the doctrinal section of the letter starting in chapter three, Paul defends justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The Galatians had received the Holy Spirit but by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and not through works of the law. Relying on the law cannot bring about Spirit baptism.

The OT clearly teaches that justification is by faith alone. Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness prior to receiving circumcision and before the law existed.

The OT also shows that those who rely on the law for justification are under a curse. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Abraham was saved from his sin through faith prior to the coming of the law. The means of salvation did not change from faith to law (or faith plus law). The superiority of promise over works of the law did not change.

If promise is superior to law, then what is the purpose of the law? Law cannot save, but was given to take us by the hand and lead us to Christ. The law shows us our need for a savior.

Paul showed the power of the gospel of grace to do things that the law cannot do. These are authenticating evidences of the superiority of the gospel of grace over law. He showed the power of justification by faith to eliminate distinctions, to unify people who are different in the body of Christ. There are no real cultural, ethnic, racial, past religious, financial, or social distinctions within the body of Christ. Neither should there be in practice. He showed that that justification by faith makes the elect Abraham's spiritual descendants, heirs of every spiritual blessings according to promise.

Today, we look at Paul's fear of the Galatians reverting to slavery, to a mindset and practice of working your way to heaven by keeping man-made rules and ideas even if they are derived from Scripture. Remembering our pre-saved condition is powerful in keeping us from deserting the true gospel.

Paul's defense of justification by faith – Fear of reverting to enslavement (4:8-11)

1. Past Condition (4:8)

⁸However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods.

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

Paul is now going to give the Galatians a glimpse into his own heart of concern for their spiritual wellbeing. Paul had just explained another thing that law cannot do but faith can. Justification by grace through faith in Christ alone makes us Abraham's spiritual descendants, heirs according to promise. But we were not always an heir. Prior to Christ, we were held in bondage.

“At that time” refers to pre-justification, pre-regeneration, before you exercised the gift of true saving faith, before you repented of your sins and surrendered your life to Christ.

At that time, “you did not know God” being “separate from Christ”, “having no hope and without God in the world”, and “excluded from the life of God”.

¹²*remember* that you were at that time **separate from Christ**, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, **having no hope and without God in the world**. (Ephesians 2:12)

¹⁸being darkened in their understanding, **excluded from the life of God** because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; (Ephesians 4:18)

You knew that God existed through general revelation, but did not “know” your creator *relationally*.

¹**The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.** ²Day to day pours forth speech, And night to night reveals knowledge.

³There is no speech, nor are there words; Their voice is not heard. ⁴Their line has gone out through all the earth, And their utterances to the end of the world. In them He has placed a tent for the sun, ⁵Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber; It rejoices as a strong man to run his course. ⁶Its rising is from one end of the heavens, And its circuit to the other end of them; And there is nothing hidden from its heat. (Psalm 19:1-6)

¹⁴But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out ¹⁵and saying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. ¹⁶In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; ¹⁷and yet **He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.**” (Acts 14:14-17)

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. ²⁰For **since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.** ²¹For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²²Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. (Romans 1:18-23)

The usage of “did not know” indicates a settled state or condition, being spiritually “dead in your trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1).

❖ How do you refer to your pre-salvation state?

At that time, you were held in bondage (4:3). You were a slave. First a slave to sin.

³³Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, **everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.** (John 8:33)

¹⁶Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone *as* slaves for obedience, you are **slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?** ¹⁷But thanks be to God that though **you were slaves of sin,** you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸and having **been freed from sin,** you became slaves of righteousness. (Romans 6:16-18)

³For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, **enslaved to various lusts and pleasures,** spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. (Titus 3:3)

You were also “held in bondage under the elemental things of the world” which is the futile attempt to try and work yourself to God.

³So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. (Galatians 4:3)

Your mind was also blinded and held captive by Satan:

⁴in whose case the god of this world has **blinded the minds of the unbelieving** so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Corinthians 4:4)

²⁵with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, ²⁶and they may come to their senses *and escape* from the snare of the devil, **having been held captive by him to do his will.** (2 Timothy 2:25-26)

You were also “slaves to those which by nature are no gods”. You were enslaved to something whose essential nature is something different than God. The Scriptures declare that there is no true God but the Lord.

³⁹now therefore today, and take it to your heart, that **the Lord, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other.** (Deuteronomy 4:39)

⁵**“I am the Lord, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God.** I will gird you, though you have not known Me; ⁶That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun That there is no one besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other, ⁷The One forming light and creating darkness, Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these. (Isaiah 48:5-7)

⁴Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, **we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.** ⁵For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, ⁶yet for us there is *but* one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we *exist* for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we *exist* through Him. (1 Corinthians 8:4-13)

²You know that **when you were pagans, you were led astray to the mute idols,** however you were led. (1 Corinthians 12:2)

⁹For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how **you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God,** ¹⁰and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *that is* Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come. (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10)

We understand that there is no god but the God of the Bible. But what are “those which by nature are no gods”? These are idols, false gods. The first biblical description of not-gods is those who are worshipped. The second description of those not-gods is those to whom one prays for salvation/deliverance. This is something or someone who is trusted for salvation.

³You shall have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20:3)

Speaking of the folly of idolatry... ¹⁷But the rest of it he makes into a god, his graven image. **He falls down before it and worships; he also prays to it and says, “Deliver me, for you are my god.”** (Isaiah 44:17)

²⁰“Gather yourselves and come; Draw near together, you fugitives of the nations; They have no knowledge, **Who carry about their wooden idol And pray to a god who cannot save.** (Isaiah 45:20)

⁶“Those who lavish gold from the purse and weigh silver on the scale Hire a goldsmith, and he makes in into a god; **they bow down, indeed they worship it.** ⁷“They lift it upon the shoulder and carry it; They set it in its place and it stands there. It does not move from its place. **Though one may cry to it, it cannot answer; It cannot deliver him from his distress.** (Isaiah 46:6-7)

We saw above that the NT includes the idea of an idol being a false god that one worships and calls to for salvation. But the NT also expands this idea to describes sinful acts that come from idolatry. In NT times, there were sexual sins and substance abuse sins that were associated with idolatry.

⁵Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, **which amounts to idolatry.** (Colossians 3:5)

⁵For this you know with certainty, that **no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater,** has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. (Ephesians 5:4-6)

⁹Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? **Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, ¹⁰nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.** (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

²so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. ³For the time already past is sufficient *for you* to have **carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries.** ⁴In *all* this, they are surprised that you do not run with *them* into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign *you*; ⁵but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. (1 Peter 4:2-5)

Lusts of the flesh that idolaters used in their “worship” are also called idolatry.

A common idea today is to define an idol as anything that takes supremacy over God in your life (from a poor interpretation of Ezekiel 14:1-8 cf. Ezekiel 20:16). One noted author states that an idol is, “anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, and anything that you seek to give you what only God can give.” (Tim Keller in “Counterfeit Gods”).

However, the passages above about idolatry shows that an “idol” is not your sin. Selfishness, pride, materialism, immoral sexuality, licentious living, etc. are things that people call “idols”. But the Bible describes an idol by two primary characteristics – worship (including the lusts of the flesh that are part of idolatrous worship experiences) and trust for salvation. This could be a false god, or an errant view of the true God, or oneself, but sin in-and-of itself is not idolatry.

Prior to knowing God, we were a slave to sin, slaves to a works-based mentality, and slaves to trusting something else for salvation than the promises of the one true God.

❖ Are you still living as if enslaved?

2. Current State (4:9a)

^{9a}But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God,

^{9a}But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, (ESV)

Prior to surrendering your life to Christ, you were a slave to sin, a slave to a works-based mentality, and a slave to idols.

“But now” is a phrase of contrast. It is used often to contrast the former, unsaved state of the believer with their new position in Christ (Romans 3:21; 6:22; 7:6; 11:30; Ephesians 2:13; 5:8; Colossians 3:8; 2 Timothy 1:10; 1 Peter 2:10; 2:25). You once were a slave, but now you are free in Christ.

¹²*remember* that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³**But now** in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (Ephesians 2:12-13)

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for *God’s* own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; ¹⁰for you once were not a people, **but now** you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, **but now** you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

“Know” here is different than in verse 8. Verse 8 speaks of knowing intuitively. Here in verse 9 it speaks of knowing intimately, experientially.

Paul gives two perspectives of our salvation. Both are true, but one is limited. We have come to experience God, that is true. But the grander view, the more glorious view, is that the Creator of the universe just does not know about me, but is in an intimate, personal relationship with me through His Son. When I was a dead slave, without hope and without God in the world, and excluded from the life of God, Christ Jesus intervened in my hopelessness and helplessness to save this foremost of sinners.

❖ **How does the gratitude produced by these truths move you to live?**

3. Paul’s fear of the Galatians returning to slavery (4:9b-11)

^{9b}how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? ¹⁰You observe days and months and seasons and years. ¹¹I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.

^{9b}how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? ¹⁰You observe days and months and seasons and years! ¹¹I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain. (ESV)

You have come to truly know God and even better to be known by Him in a personal, intimate way. God has saved you and is sanctifying you.

So, “how is it that you turn back” to your pre-saved life? How is it that you would want to return to childhood from adulthood? How is it that you would want to return to slavery from freedom? Paul’s question is one of emotion, from a heart that is disturbed, shocked, perplexed, sad, disappointed.

“Turn back” means to revert or return. Its usage here indicates that the Galatians are in the process of turning back and that the turning force or attraction comes from outside themselves. It is the pull of works. The desire to be enslaved all over again to the weak and worthless elemental things.

“Elemental things” most likely refers to the works of the law to which the unsaved are enslaved in the futile attempt to try and work themselves to God. These are “weak” meaning without strength or bodily vigor or figuratively of spiritual weakness or being powerless to produce positive spiritual results. These are also “worthless” which describes a state of total destitution. Works are destitute, unable to produce positive spiritual results.

The amazing thing is that the Galatians actually desired to be enslaved to works all over again. It is amazing that the follower of Christ who has been freed from enslavement to works would want to return to legalism.

❖ **In what ways do you demonstrate a desire to be enslaved again?**

The Galatians were desiring to be enslaved to works of the law again. “Observe” means to observe carefully, scrupulously, to be “legalistic” in observance.

Christ has set us free and we are not to be subject to any form of legalism. The following of any system of rules or traditions has no merit or value toward salvation nor sanctification.

Matthew 15 provides a good description of legalism. “Traditions” are those man-made doctrines, teaching, or rules which take the place of Scripture.

³And He answered and said to them, “Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.’ ⁵But you say, ‘Whoever says to *his* father or mother, “Whatever I have that would help you has been given *to God*,” ⁶he is not to honor his father or his mother.’ And *by this* you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: ⁸“This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me. ⁹“But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.” (Matthew 15:3-9)

Legalism...

- Places man-made rules before God’s word (v3)
- Invalidates the word of God by placing man-made rules over it (v6)
- Is hypocritical (v7)
- Appears to bring people close to God but in fact takes them far away (v8)
- Is vain worship of God (v8-9)
- Lies about man-made rules and calls them God’s word (v9)

❖ **What are some man-made rules that people want you follow? What do you think about those – good, bad, wise, foolish, etc.?**

The Galatians who were in danger of abandoning justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone were following the Judaizers who would have them observe days and months and seasons and years. This is reference to the Jewish ceremonial calendar.

“Days” most likely refers to the keeping of the Jewish sabbath. This was the ritualistic keeping of Saturday or the day that God rested from His creative work.

“Months” refers to the sacrifices that were offered on the first day of each month (Numbers 28:11-14).

“Seasons and years” refer to all the Jewish feasts or festivals outlined in Leviticus 23. The spring festivals are: Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of First-fruits, and the Feast of Weeks. The fall feasts are the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles.

Is the OT law required for the believer in the New Covenant? No (see the VBC position paper “The Christian’s Obligation to the Law of Moses”). Romans 10:4 gives us a direct statement that “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” The word “end” can be translated “goal” but with the sense of completion. Therefore, the Law has ended its application to believers because it reaches its conclusion in Christ.

¹⁷“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. (Matthew 5:17)

Christians who mistakenly believe that elements of the Law of Moses are required for believers in Christ today are, in the words of Peter from Acts 15:10, “placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.”

❖ **Are you a practicing legalist? Do you place rules in your life or the lives of others to further salvation or sanctification?**

“I fear” means apprehension ranging from mild uneasiness to terror. Paul was fearing “for you”, the object being the Galatians themselves. He has referred to them as believers in the letter, but here tells them that he is fearing that their danger of abandoning justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone “perhaps” is well on its way to fruition.

❖ **In what ways do you demonstrate godly concern for the spiritual condition of people?**

“I have labored” means to exhibit great effort and exertion, to the point of sweat and exhaustion until worn out or depleted, even with the implication of difficulty and trouble.

²⁸We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. ²⁹For this purpose also I **labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.** (Colossians 1:28-29)

“Vain” means without a cause or legitimate reason, for no purpose, and being without any result, fruitlessly, needlessly.

Paul had previously asked the Galatians, “Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?” (3:4). In their case, if they really were not believers as would be evident by them returning to works, then the suffering they had experienced would have been needless.

“If indeed it was in vain” indicates that Paul found it hard to believe that the Galatians would abandon grace and turn back to works.

Paul had traveled to and through Galatia for two years and approximately 1400 miles. He suffered hardship, was persecuted, was ill (Galatians 4:14), and was murdered by stoning then healed (Acts 14:19-20). All that Paul suffered and sacrificed, his extreme effort to bring them the gospel and their initial commitment and apparent regeneration response would be “in vain” should they turn away from the true gospel and return to works.

❖ **In what ways are you or are you tempted to be a legalist?**

❖ **In what ways do you “labor” in your Christ-given mission of making disciples?**

Conclusion

The Galatians were in danger of abandoning justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Paul fears of the Galatians that they are in the process of reverting to slavery, to a mindset and practice of working your way to heaven by keeping man-made rules.

Additional Study

1. Read Galatians once this week a chapter at a time (one chapter a day for six days).
2. Today's Questions
 - Spend some time praying for God to show you your pre-salvation state depravity.
 - Spend some time thinking about your current state of being known by God.
 - Spend some time evaluating your daily walk seeing if there are ways in which you are walking as if enslaved again.
 - Spend some time thinking about the people in your life and praying for them to be walking well.