

Lesson 17 – Galatians 4:12-20

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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.

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.

Paul now has moved to relating his fear of the Galatians reverting to slavery, to a mindset and practice of working their way to heaven by keeping man-made rules.

Today, Paul appeals to the Galatians to see his point of view and remember their relationship and the difference between himself and the Judaizers in their concern for the Galatians.

Paul's defense of justification by faith – Paul's love for the Galatians (4:12-20)

1. Paul's appeal (4:12a)

^{12a}I beg of you, brethren, become as I *am*, for I also *have become* as you *are*.

^{12a}Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. (ESV)

At various points in the epistle, Paul moves from defending theologian to heart-breaking shepherd and back. In 4:12-20 we see Paul's passionate, pastoral heart as he calls on the Galatians to remember how they first met Paul and received the gospel. He starts here in v12 by calling them brethren, fellow children of God by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. At the end of this passage, Paul will appeal to them as "my children" (4:19).

"Become as I" is first in the Greek for emphasis. Paul commands them to continue becoming what Paul is.

He begs them to do this. "Beg" means to beseech, request with the usage of a continual command. Paul is continually beseeching them to become as he is. There is a sense of urgency here – pleading, entreating, imploring them to reconsider their direction.

What does Paul mean "become as I *am*, for I also *have become* as you *are*" or literally "continue becoming as I, for I also as you"? What does Paul and the Galatians have in common and not in common in their current spiritual condition? Paul stated earlier that he died to the law so that he might live to God.

¹⁹For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God. ²⁰I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me (Galatians 2:19-20)

This was true of the Galatians too. This is true of all true believers. Both Paul and the Galatians had this in common. But the Galatians were now questioning the validity of that position. Something that Paul never did.

❖ **In heart belief or practice, how do you question the validity of what Christ has done for you?**

2. The reminder of their past relationship (4:12b-14)

^{12b}You have done me no wrong; ¹³but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; ¹⁴and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus *Himself*.

^{12b}You did me no wrong. ¹³You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, ¹⁴and 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. (ESV)

Paul begs the Galatians to not abandon justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. He has spoken the truth to the Galatians in some strong words. Some could accuse Paul of being vindictive regarding those words. But, when Paul first met the Galatians and became their spiritual father, he reminds them, "You have done me no wrong." In fact, just the opposite.

Paul is concerned about them in this time of spiritual sickness just as they had been concerned for him in his earlier time of physical illness. Paul preached the gospel to the Galatians the first time because of an illness (“bodily illness”) or ailment (ESV). The Greek could mean simply weakness which is consistent with Paul’s idea of himself. However, most commentators view this as an actual physical sickness. We do not know what that condition was and there is much speculation ranging from malaria or dengue fever to a serious eye infection (c.f. 4:15).

Whatever it was, it was a trial for the Galatians to care for him. But in the midst of it, they did not despise or loathe him. “Despise” means to count as nothing or worthless. “Loathe” means to treat with contempt. In ancient times (and unfortunately today also), many believed that sickness was a sign of God’s judgement or removal of favor. If the Galatians had thought that then instead of helping Paul, they could have counted him as worthless and treated him with contempt. Jesus taught against that idea.

¹As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. ²And His disciples asked Him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “*It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.* (John 9:1-3)

Regardless of the exact “why” that Paul was afflicted, we do know that it was for God’s glory (Psalm 19:1; Ephesians 1:4-6, 11-12; Romans 9:23; Revelation 4:11) and Paul and the Galatians’ sanctifying good. The works of God were displayed in Paul for God’s glory.

²⁸And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. ²⁹For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; (Romans 8:28-29)

❖ How do you view bodily ailments?

In the midst of a debilitating disease, the Galatians received Paul as if he were Christ Jesus Himself. There is a key idea here for accomplishing our mission of making disciples. The acceptance or rejection of the gospel messengers is really an acceptance or rejection of Christ.

❖ What are the implications of rejection being about Christ and not us?

3. Change in their relationship (4:15-16)

¹⁵Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. ¹⁶So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?

¹⁵What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. ¹⁶Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? (ESV)

When Paul first visited Galatia, he became ill and the Galatians nursed him back to help, receiving him as they would have received Christ Himself. But now Paul asks, “Where then is that sense of blessing you had?” “Blessing” has the idea of a feeling of joy, fulfillment, and contentedness. We might say, “What caused you to lose that loving feeling you had for me?” Paul knew and we know.

The Galatians entertained the false teaching of the Judaizers. They entertained a false non-gospel. They are in the process of deserting justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The Galatians turned their love from their beloved preacher of the truth to the false teachers.

At the time they first met Paul and he preached the gospel among them and they responded. They loved Paul and would have done anything for Paul because of that love. Paul continually bore witness of their devotion.

There are two main ideas on Paul's phrase "if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me". First is that Paul is using a figure of speech. He is speaking in the extreme hyperbole, something that is not possible, but if it were would have demonstrated a deep love, devotion, and care.

Secondly, it is possible that Paul's bodily illness or ailment was some sort of eye disease. If so then the feelings of love, care, and devotion of the Galatians for Paul were extreme and they would have sacrificed significantly for him. And they also would have deferred to his doctrinal teaching as an apostle.

❖ **How is your devotion to the brethren demonstrated?**

Paul risked the Galatians thinking he was their enemy by telling them the truth about their movement away from the true gospel. "Enemy" means to be hateful, to be hostile toward, to be at enmity with, or to be an adversary of someone. Speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) to believers and unbelievers is an essential part of the Christian life. Speaking the truth sometimes risks relationship, but real love places priority on the spiritual condition of people. Of course, these conversations must be biblical themselves.

¹⁵but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, **yet with gentleness and reverence**; (1 Peter 3:15)

⁵Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. ⁶**Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.** (Colossians 4:5-6)

²⁴The Lord's bond-servant must **not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged,** ²⁵**with 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 2:24-26)

¹Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a **spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.** (Galatians 6:1)

¹⁶Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, **with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,** singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3:16 c.f. Ephesians 5:18-20)

❖ **Are you a speaker of truth in love?**

4. Judaizers' view of the Galatians (4:17-18)

¹⁷They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them. ¹⁸But it is good always to be eagerly sought in a commendable manner, and not only when I am present with you.

¹⁷They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. ¹⁸It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, (ESV)

Paul now addresses the motives and behavior of them (they) – the Judaizers.

First are the motives. The Judaizers “eagerly seek” the Galatians. “Eagerly seek” means to be fervent or zealous in either a positive or a negative sense. It had two primary uses in Koine Greek. It referred to the affection of young lovers and envy or jealousy. In the NT it is translated elsewhere as “jealous”, “earnestly desire”, “envious”, and “eagerly seek”. The picture is vivid. The Judaizers are taking an intense interest in the Galatians. They are “eagerly desire” them; they are jealous for them. The ESV translates this as “make much of you”. The Galatians were important to the Judaizers, but not in a good way.

“Not commendably” means not good, not well, not nobly, not honorably, not rightly. Absolutely not for any good purpose.

The Judaizers are eagerly seeking, pursuing, making much of the Galatians, but not for an honorable or good purpose. Their motive is impure.

❖ **What is your motive in building relationships?**

Their method is to “shut you out so that you will seek them”. The Judaizers wanted to keep them from the influence of Paul. They wanted to shut them off from the spiritual influence of their spiritual father and apostle of Christ.

This is a cultish behavior. Cults seek to prevent their followers and those they are eagerly seeking from the truth, from positive spiritual influence. They prevent critical thought and inquiry and require breaking ties with those who may prevent assimilation. In addition, they will “love bomb” those they eagerly seek. They “love” those they eagerly seek by providing attention, support, affection, help. All the things that the world calls “love”, but which are devoid of truth with a corrupt motive. It is not a sincere love.

²²Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a **sincere love** of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, ²³for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, *that is*, through the living and enduring word of God. (1 Peter 1:22-23)

❖ **Is your love for the brethren sincere?**

This motive and behavior may be present with us too. Do we “eagerly seek” people to make them something different than Scripture says (“a twice as much a son of hell as ourselves” – Matthew 23:15)? Do we “eagerly seek” people as a trophy for our own praise? Do we “eagerly seek” people for the pleasant feelings of success? Or do we “eagerly seek” people in a commendable manner (for a good purpose)?

Unlike the Judaizers, Paul “eagerly sought them in a commendable manner”. Paul’s motives were pure and desired to please his Lord through biblical accuracy and pastoral care. He loved the Galatians so he told them the truth and risked a friendship for their spiritual benefit.

It is good that brethren “eagerly seek” us. It does not have to only be the one the Lord used to bring the gospel to us, or our elders, or our fellow local church members. Other brethren may seek to minister to and with us which is a good thing. Paul thought that too since he believed it a good thing “not only when I am present with you.”

❖ **Are you eagerly seeking for a good purpose the brethren?**

5. Paul’s distress for the Galatians (4:19-20)

¹⁹My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you— ²⁰but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

¹⁹my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! ²⁰I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. (ESV)

Paul finishes his personal plea with a statement of his purpose and a description of his heart.

Paul often uses family metaphors to describe his relationship to his beloved churches that the Lord founded through him.

¹⁴I do not write these things to shame you, but **to admonish you as my beloved children.**

¹⁵For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, **yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.** (1 Corinthians 4:14-15)

⁷But we proved to be gentle among you, **as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children.** ⁸Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.

⁹For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, *how* working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. ¹⁰You are witnesses, and *so is* God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; ¹¹just as you know how **we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children,** ¹²so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. (1 Thessalonians 2:7-12)

“My children” means a child produced and refers so a physical or spiritual descendant. Paul, one of the spiritually resurrected elect, preached the gospel to all spiritually dead people with the result that God spiritually raised His elect from the dead. The Lord sovereignly used Paul to bring this about and Paul loved his children as a mother does her children.

“With whom I am again in labor” means literally for the mother to suffer the pains of birth. The idea is to suffer greatly. Paul was in emotional, one might even say spiritual, pain at his children who are entertaining abandoning justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

¹For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, ²that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and *attaining* to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, *resulting* in a true knowledge of God's mystery, *that is*, Christ *Himself*, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Colossians 2:1-3)

²⁸Apart from *such* external things, there is the daily pressure on me *of* concern for all the churches. ²⁹Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern? (2 Corinthians 11:28-29)

⁴I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth. (3 John 4)

“Formed” means to form and fashion and was originally used of artists who shaped their material into an image. It was also used in a medical sense for fetal development – a child being “formed” in its mother.

The question is, “when is it that Christ was formed in them?” At some point, Christ was formed in the Galatians since Paul was “again in labor”. Paul’s labor of birthing them was complete at some point. Christ was formed in them and Paul had left them in the care of shepherds in the local church to protect them, feed them to grow into full maturity, and pursue the disciple-making mission.

Some may say that Christ being formed in them is progressive sanctification. This seems unlikely since that full forming produced by a life of progressive sanctification is never complete. If that is so, then Christ would literally never be formed in them.

Others may say that it means the point of salvation since at that time Christ lives (is formed) in the believer. But Paul then would be saying that they were saved, now they are not saved, and he is once again in labor for them to be saved again. We know that is NOT true because all true believers once saved are kept by God’s power and are always saved (John 5:24; 6:37-40; 10:27-30; Romans 5:9-10; 8:1, 31-39; 1 Corinthians 1:4-8; Ephesians 4:30; Hebrews 7:25; 13:5; 1 Peter 1:5; Jude 24).

1 Thessalonians gives us some information that is helpful. Paul had ministered in Thessalonica for several months. He was there long enough to need to work to support himself (2:9; 3:8), minister outside the synagogue (1:9), develop a deep care and affection between the Thessalonians and himself (2:8; 2:11-12; 3:6-10), and receive two financial support gifts from Philippi (Philippians 4:16). He was there long enough to see if Christ was formed in them or not.

²We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention *of you* in our prayers; ³constantly bearing in mind your **work of faith** and **labor of love** and **steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ** in the presence of our God and Father, ⁴knowing, brethren beloved by God, *His* choice of you; ⁵for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and **with full conviction**; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, **having received the word** in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. (1 Thessalonians 1:2-7)

¹³For this reason we also constantly thank God that when **you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.** (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

It seems best to understand “Christ formed in you” as a full-conviction reception of the word of God and the subjective evidences of salvation (work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ).

❖ **Is Christ formed in you?**

Paul wished to be present with them to resolve this issue face-to-face. Paul understood what modern scholars thought they discovered. Personal, face-to-face conversation is the most effective. He wanted to relay his full heart which he could not do in written form.

In writing he has addressed them:

⁶I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; (Galatians 1:6)

¹¹For I would have you know, brethren, ... (Galatians 1:11)

¹O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? ... (Galatians 3:1)

¹⁵Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations ... (Galatians 3:15)

¹²I beg of you, brethren ... (Galatians 4:12-19)

But to their face he could pour out his heart in pleading for them to stay faithful to Christ and reject the false teaching of the Judaizers.

He wants to be present with them for he is perplexed about them. “Perplexed” means to be at a loss, to be dazed and confused, to be disturbed, to be at wits’ end. Paul is at a loss to understand the Galatians’ desire to become slaves of law again and abandon grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

❖ **Do you live a perplexing life, vacillating between grace and law, freedom and slavery?**

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 so he pours out his heart to them in perplexity. He is again in labor until Christ is formed in them.

Additional Study

1. Read Galatians once this week a chapter at a time (one chapter a day for six days).
 - Do you seek people in a commendable manner?
 - Is Christ formed in you?
 - Spend some praying for yourself and your relationships that Christ would be formed in you both.