

Galatians

A Pastor's Perplexity

Galatians 4:12-20

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Scripture

We are working our way Sunday by Sunday through the apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians. One of the advantages of this approach is that we cover the whole counsel of God—at least as it is revealed in this portion of God's Word to us. By studying books of the Bible, or large sections of the Bible, in their entirety forces us to examine what God says to us rather than what I want to say to you if I was preaching on my pet topic each week.

Our text for today is probably one that I would not have chosen to preach if I were to preach on my choice of a topic.

In this section of Paul's letter he talks about his relationship with his congregations. In fact, he talks about a pastor's perplexity regarding the members of the congregation drifting off into error.

Let's see how the apostle Paul puts it in Galatians 4:12-20:

¹² I plead with you, brothers, become like me, for I became like you. You have done me no wrong. ¹³ As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. ¹⁴ Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. ¹⁵ What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. ¹⁶ Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

¹⁷ Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may be zealous for them. ¹⁸ It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always and not just when I am with you. ¹⁹ My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, ²⁰ how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you! (Galatians 4:12-20)

Introduction

If you have been attending the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church for just a few Sundays at least, I am sure that you have noticed that the apostle Paul is passionate about truth. He is exceedingly zealous for God's truth to be understood, believed, and proclaimed.

You may recall that the reason Paul wrote this letter to the Galatians is because he had heard that the Galatians were starting to believe false teaching. The apostle Paul had planted a number of churches in the region of Galatia. As a result of his ministry several churches sprang up into existence. The people were marvelously converted to Christ as they believed the gospel of God's grace.

However, some time after Paul left the region false teachers arrived in the region. They started teaching that Paul had got the gospel only half right. Paul said that in order for a person to be saved he simply needed to believe the gospel. But the false teachers said that in order for a person to be saved he needed to believe *and* obey the Law of Moses.

There is a radical difference between these two views. It is vitally important that you understand the difference. The false teachers said that *faith* and *works* go together, and the result is *salvation*. Paul, on the other hand, said that *faith* and *salvation* go together, and the result is *works*. Do you see the difference between the two? It is important to see the difference between the two because the consequence of believing the latter is heaven, while the consequence of believing the former is hell.

For the first three chapters in his letter to the Galatians the apostle Paul has been trying to clarify the difference between his teaching and that of the false teachers. But Paul's approach changes in Galatians 4:12. Paul's vehemence against the false teachers subsides, and he now appeals to the Galatians with deep feeling and passionate tenderness. In fact, John MacArthur notes

that Paul's words here in Galatians 4:12-20 are the strongest words of personal affection that Paul uses in any of his letters.¹ Instead of scolding them, he pours out his heart expressing his profound concern for them. He says, in effect, "I care about you very much. I love you deeply just as you have loved me deeply. Please listen to what I have to say because I am perplexed about you!"

Commentator John Stott says, "In Galatians 1-3 we have been listening to Paul the apostle, Paul the theological, Paul the defender of the faith; but now we are hearing Paul the man, Paul the pastor, Paul the passionate lover of souls."²

Lesson

Following John Stott's outline, in this personal section of Paul's letter to the Galatians, Paul first appeals to them, then he fondly remembers their loving acceptance of him, and finally he reminds them of his attitude toward them.

I. Paul's Appeal (4:12a)

First, notice Paul's appeal.

Paul begins this personal section of the letter with an appeal to the Galatians. He says in verse 12a: **"I plead with you, brothers, become like me."**

Paul, you may remember, was formerly a Pharisee and devoutly committed to Judaism. In fact, Paul was a brilliant man, having the equivalent of two earned doctorates. He was also a persecutor of Christians. He stood by as Steven, the first martyr of the first century church, was stoned, and secured permission to rout the Christians in Damascus. It was while he was on his way to Damascus that Jesus Christ revealed himself to Paul. Paul believed the gospel, received salvation and began to do good works as a result.

¹ John F. MacArthur, Jr. *Galatians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1987), 114.

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Galatians: Only One Way*, The Bible Speaks Today series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 111.

Paul experienced profound freedom and joy when he became a Christian. No longer was he under the bondage of the law. No longer was he like a slave. He was now set free to worship and serve Christ. He was a new creation in Christ. The gospel is profoundly liberating. That is why he said to the Galatians, **“I plead with you, brothers, become like me.”**

Later, Paul expressed a similar sentiment to King Agrippa. At the time, Paul was a prisoner in Caesarea. The Jewish leaders wanted Paul killed and asked Governor Festus to arrest him. Festus arrested Paul, but upon investigation found no basis for bringing charges against him. While King Agrippa was visiting, Festus asked Agrippa to hear the case so that charges could be specified against Paul. In his appearance before King Agrippa, Paul shared he had come to believe the gospel.

Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains” (Acts 26:28-29).

In other words, Paul said to Agrippa, “I don’t want you to be a prisoner like me, but I do want you to know and experience true freedom and joy, which is found only in the gospel of grace.”

We should all have Paul’s attitude. Our greatest desire should be to know Christ, to believe the gospel, and to know true freedom and joy, and for others to know it too.

Now, the Galatians might have asked, “Why should we become like you, Paul?”

Paul’s response was, **“For I became like you”** (4:12b).

When Paul went to Galatia, he did not remain disconnected from the Galatians. Rather, he got involved in their lives and adopted many of their customs (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:19-22).

The Galatians responded to Paul’s love in the same way. They reciprocated his love to them. There were no bad memories of their time together. Now, Paul reminds them of that and asks them to return to how things were before, and to follow him.

There is a deeply significant gospel principle in verse 12. Paul teaches that if we are ever going to impact a community with the gospel, we need to be incarnational. If we want people to become like us, we need to first become like them. Our desire as Christians is for people to know Christ, to believe the gospel, and to experience true freedom and joy, isn't it? But in order for people to experience that, we will first need to get into their world. We will need to get into their homes and into their lives, and have them into our homes and into our lives. We will need to get to know them, love them, care for them, and experience a deep connection with them.

Hudson Taylor was the founder of the China Inland Mission, today known as the Overseas Missionary Fellowship. He was the first missionary to go into the interior of China in the 19th century. He was used mightily by God to encourage thousands of Christians to go to the mission field and to see many Chinese become Christians. As far as I know, Hudson Taylor was the first Protestant missionary to wear national clothes. Jesuit priests had been doing it for years before Taylor put on Chinese clothes. Shortly after he arrived in China, he began wearing Chinese clothes in order to identify with the Chinese. He became like them (by identifying with them) so that they might become like him (as a Christian).

You and I live in Tampa. We don't have to wear exotic clothes to identify with the people of New Tampa. However, if you and I are going to impact our community with the gospel, then we must get into the lives and hearts and concerns of our neighbors so that they can become like us—Christians!

II. The Galatians' Attitude towards Paul (4:12c-16)

Second, let's note the Galatians' attitude towards Paul.

Paul contrasts the attitude of the Galatians towards him in the past, when he first visited them, with their attitude towards him now, when he wrote to them.

The attitude of the Galatians towards Paul in the past was commendable. In fact, Paul said, **“You have done me no wrong”** (4:12c).

He reminded them of his first visit to them. He said in verse 13, **“As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you.”** Nobody knows exactly what illness Paul had when he visited the Galatians and preached the gospel to them. Some scholars think that Paul contracted malaria just before arriving in Galatia. Other scholars say that Paul is referring to the stoning he received during his evangelistic ministry in Lystra (cf. Acts 14:19-20). And yet other scholars think that it might have been a painful eye problem because of Paul’s comment in verse 15, where he said, **“I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.”**

Whatever the **illness**, it was serious enough for Paul to have come under the care of the Galatians for an extended period. But instead of ignoring Paul or denying him care, they loved him and cared for him. And so the apostle Paul said in verse 14, **“Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself.”**

But between the time of the apostle Paul’s first visit and the time of his writing, things had changed. Their attitude toward him had changed. Their joy was gone. Their respect for him had evaporated. So Paul said in verses 15-16, **“What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?”**

Notice what is happening here. When the apostle Paul first came to the Galatians, he was not well. Even though he had some kind of illness, he loved them and got into their hearts and lives. He shared the gospel with them, and they believed the gospel and experienced joy and freedom and new life in Christ.

But now some false teachers arrived in Galatia. They taught a different gospel—which Paul said was no gospel at all. Unfortunately, the Galatians believed the errant teaching.

We ask, “Why? Why did they believe the teaching of the false teachers?” The false teachers were teaching that faith plus works results in salvation. In other words, they were adding performance as a necessary requirement for salvation. And this is the problem we face all the time. We constantly gravitate towards adding performance to faith as the basis for our acceptance by God.

It seems so much easier, doesn’t it? After all, if I follow a certain list of dos and don’ts, then I can measure my performance. But the problem is that we never know if we have done enough, and furthermore, when we stop to think about it, we never perform it perfectly.

A few weeks ago I attended our Presbytery meeting. The Moderator delivered an excellent sermon for our time of worship. He told us one story that illustrates the inadequacy of performance. A man died and went to the gates of gates of heaven, where he was met by Peter. The man said, “I have died and I would now like to enter heaven.”

Peter explained to the man that there was a system of points to qualify people to enter heaven. The man thought to himself, “That should be fine. I am a Christian; I have lived a pretty good life. I should not have trouble getting enough points to get into heaven.”

And so he said to Peter, “Tell me what I need to do to get into heaven.”

Peter said, “You earn a certain number of points for how well you have done things while you were alive. You simply need to get 100 points to get into heaven.”

“Great!” said the man. “Ask away!”

“The first question is this,” said Peter. “How did you do in your business career?”

“I was in business for myself for 42 years,” said the man. “I eventually had 200 employees. I paid above average salaries and

wages. I never cheated anybody. I was always upright and honest in all of my business dealings.”

“Good,” responded Peter. “That is 2 points.”

“2 points? That’s all?”

“Yes,” said Peter, “Here’s the next question. How well did you do in your marriage and family?”

“This is a good question. I was married for 52 years to the same woman. I never once cheated; I never even looked at another woman. I took my wife out to dinner once a week, wrote her a love note twice a week, and gave her flowers once a month. And we raised 6 children who all love and serve the Lord.”

“Good,” responded Peter. “That is 3 points.”

The man was astonished, but did not say anything.

“Here is the next question. How well did you do in your church?”

“Well,” said the man, “I have been a member of the church for 85 years. I never missed a single Sunday’s worship service until I got ill last month before I died. I served on every committee in the church during my 85 years, though not all at the same time! And I gave 15% of all my income to the church.”

“Good,” responded Peter. “That is 1 point.”

“What!” said the man. “At this rate the only way I will get into heaven is by the grace of God!”

Friends, that is exactly how any one of us gets into heaven. It is only by the grace of God that anyone ever gets into heaven. It is never by our performance, even though we have a constant tendency to want to earn our way into heaven and God’s favor by our performance.

III. Paul’s Attitude towards the Galatians (4:17-20)

Finally, observe Paul’s attitude towards the Galatians.

Paul contrasts his attitude towards the Galatians with the false teachers’ attitude towards the Galatians.

Looking at the attitude of the false teachers, Paul said in verse 17, **“Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may be zealous for them.”** Paul had gone to Galatia and preached the gospel to the Galatians. They had come to know Christ and believe the gospel through Paul’s ministry. After Paul left the false teachers arrived and fussed and fawned over the Galatians. Eventually, they started to drive a wedge between Paul and the Galatians. This is a popular strategy with false teachers, isn’t it? They drive a wedge between teachers of the truth and their students.

Paul continued in verse 18, **“It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always and not just when I am with you.”**

Paul then explained that his deep desire was to see Christ formed in the Galatians. And so he said in verses 19-20, **“My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!”**

Here is the difference between the false teachers and Paul. In fact, this is the difference between all false teachers and teachers of the truth. The false teachers wanted the Galatians to become like them. They wanted the Galatians to conform to their practices and performance. Paul, however, wanted the Galatians to become like Christ.

And so commentator John Stott says, “The difference between Paul and the false teachers should now be clear. The false teachers were seeking themselves to dominate the Galatians: Paul longed that Christ be formed in them. They had a selfish eye to their own prestige and position; Paul was prepared to sacrifice himself for them, to be in travail until Christ was formed in them.”³

Here is the point. Our goal must be to see Christ formed in us and in others. It is not to see ourselves reproduced in others. So, when we teach, let us do so to see Christ formed in others.

³ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

Conclusion

Let me close with a two points of application.

First, believe the gospel of grace. Believe that God is holy and that you are not. Confess that you are a sinner and that you have broken God's law. Acknowledge that God sent Jesus, his Son, to earth, and that Jesus lived a perfect life. Then he went to the cross and paid the penalty for sin, your sin. Believe all that God has done for you in Christ to save you. And if you believe the gospel of grace, you will experience freedom and great joy.

C. S. Lewis described joy 50 years ago in terms that make even more sense today in our commuter-driven society. He said:

A car is made to run on petrol [gasoline], and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on himself. He himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness [i.e., joy] and peace apart from himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.⁴

Second, don't believe the gospel of works. The gospel of works is faith plus works, which results in salvation. That is a deadly gospel. In fact, it will take you to hell and not to heaven. Moreover, it will rob you of your joy. It will result in bondage and not freedom. You will feel yourself to be a slave and not a child of God.

May God help each one of us believe the gospel of grace and reject the gospel of works. Amen.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Harper Collins, 1952), 50.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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