

New Birth Brings Freedom

Printed Text · Galatians 4:8-20

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson we will: CLASSIFY religious expectations and practices that diminish Christian freedom; EMPATHIZE with those who have been harmed by narrow religiosity; and CHALLENGE unhealthy attitudes toward religious practices or traditions.

In Focus

Every week the preacher would ask if anyone needed to come down the aisle to receive Christ. Every week, Tamika would walk down the aisle like it was her first time. She would pray the sinner's prayer fervently. Since it was a large church, no one noticed that she had come up multiple times. Tamika had been raised in a church that had a lot of rules and regulations. Many of them had no biblical basis and were based on tradition more than the Word of God. Whenever she violated any of these traditions, Tamika began to feel guilty. She knew the Gospel. She knew that Jesus died for her to have a relationship with God, but she still trusted in her behavior to make her right with God.

One day, as she was talking to her friend Regina about what happened over the weekend, Regina noticed a flaw in Tamika's thinking. "Tamika, you don't have to keep going to the altar and getting saved all over again," Regina said. Tamika looked at her like a deer in headlights, and with her head tilted to the side she said, "Word?!" Regina added, "All that means nothing if you don't trust Christ." It was a moment of epiphany, as deep inside of her, something clicked for Tamika. It was the start of being free from man-made rules and entering into a deeper relationship with Christ.

In today's lesson, we will explore the religious practices and traditions that can hinder our freedom in Christ. What are some of the unhealthy attitudes and traditions that can distract us from salvation in Christ?

Keep In Mind

"But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?" (Galatians 4:9, KJV)

Words You Should Know

- A. **Elements** (Galatians 4:9) stoicheion (Gk.) — Any first thing, from which others belonging to some series or composite whole are composed; a basic or first principle.
- B. **Zealously affect** (v. 17) zeloo (Gk.) — To desire earnestly, to strive after, to be focused on a certain thing.

Say It Correctly

Judaizer. ju-de-IZ-er

KJV

Galatians 12:8 Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods.

9 But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?

10 Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years.

11 I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.

12 Brethren, I beseech you, be as I am; for I am as ye are: ye have not injured me at all.

13 Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first.

14 And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus.

15 Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me.

16 Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?

17 They zealously affect you, but not well; yea, they would exclude you, that ye might affect them.

18 But it is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing, and not only when I am present with you.

19 My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you,

20 I desire to be present with you now, and to change my voice; for I stand in doubt of you.

NLT

Galatians 4:8 Before you Gentiles knew God, you were slaves to so-called gods that do not even exist.

9 So now that you know God (or should I say, now that God knows you), why do you want to go back again and become slaves once more to the weak and useless spiritual principles of this world?

10 You are trying to earn favor with God by observing certain days or months or seasons or years.

11 I fear for you. Perhaps all my hard work with you was for nothing.

12 Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to live as I do in freedom from these things, for I have become like you Gentiles—free from those laws. You did not mistreat me when I first preached to you.

13 Surely you remember that I was sick when I first brought you the Good News.

14 But even though my condition tempted you to reject me, you did not despise me or turn me away. No, you took me in and cared for me as though I were an angel from God or even Christ Jesus himself.

15 Where is that joyful and grateful spirit you felt then? I am sure you would have taken out your own eyes and given them to me if it had been possible.

16 Have I now become your enemy because I am telling you the truth?

17 Those false teachers are so eager to win your favor, but their intentions are not good. They are trying to shut you off from me so that you will pay attention only to them.

18 If someone is eager to do good things for you, that's all right; but let them do it all the time, not just when I'm with you.

19 Oh, my dear children! I feel as if I'm going through labor pains for you again, and they will continue until Christ is fully developed in your lives.

20 I wish I were with you right now so I could change my tone. But at this distance I don't know how else to help you.

The People, Places, and Times

Judaizers. Throughout the book of Galatians, Paul mounts an unrelenting argument against the Judaizers' beliefs and activities. They were teachers who believed that the way for Gentiles to be right with God was to obey the Law of Moses, including the rite of circumcision. We do not know who the Judaizers were by name, but we do know that they argued and debated with Paul at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). The council ruled in favor of Paul and Barnabas and accepted the Gentiles as part of God's people on the basis of their belief in Christ, not circumcision.

Elemental Spirits. In ancient times, many believed in spirits that moved and operated the sun, moon, planets, and stars. These were worshiped as deities and believed to control the fate of individuals. This type of belief system is the origin of astrology, or knowledge of the stars. The astral spirits were associated with special days and rituals. Paul seems to believe that through customs and rituals involving calendar and dates, the Galatians were still in bondage to spiritual powers.

Background

Paul's thoughts in Galatians focus on the truth of the Gospel and the means of justification: Jesus Christ. Throughout the book, he denounces any attempt to justify ourselves through any other means but faith in Jesus. The Judaizers' work had undermined this belief in the Galatian church. Paul lets the Galatians know that what the Judaizers preach is not the Gospel, but in fact anti-gospel leading them back into the same bondage they were in before they believed in Christ. Putting their trust in religion or the Law is just as detrimental as putting their trust in a false deity. They both are idols that cannot save.

For Paul, this matter is of the utmost importance, and he minces no words. He pulls the curtain back and shows how he withstood Peter to his face for behavior in direct opposition to the Gospel (Galatians 2:11–16). In the beginning of the letter, he lets them know that even if an angel from heaven preached another Gospel, let them be accursed. For Paul, the truth of the Gospel is of utmost importance. We can only be justified through our faith in Christ, and can accept no substitutes. Anything less will put us in bondage.

At-A-Glance

1. The Galatians' Deception (Galatians 4:8–11)
2. The Gospel's Reception (vv. 12–15)
3. Paul's Expression (vv. 16–20)

In Depth

1. The Galatians' Deception (Galatians 4:8–11)

Paul lets the Galatians know that they had been set free from serving and worshiping idols. He then presents a rhetorical question to them, asking why they would return to bondage to the "weak and beggarly elements." The Galatians were concerned about special religious days, times, and years. They had been deceived into thinking this was the way to be right with God. These things only served to put them into bondage, while Christ came to set them free.

Paul says that observing these things was expected when they did not know God. However, now that they have heard the Gospel and known God, it is foolish to return to these things. The Galatians were released from the bondage of pagan idolatry, but now the Judaizers were seeking to bring them into religious idolatry. They were using the Jewish religion as a mediator and not trusting in Christ to be their mediator. Paul laments that if this is the case, then he has labored in vain by preaching and teaching them the Gospel.

2. The Gospel's Reception (vv. 12–15)

Next, the apostle appeals to them to become like him. He asks them to do this as a reciprocal action to his becoming like them (i.e., as a Gentile not under the Law). Paul exercised his freedom from the Law in order to contextualize the Gospel message for his Gentile audience in Galatia.

Next, he launches into his past history with the Galatians. He speaks of how he labored and preached the Gospel to them while suffering. Paul speaks of an infirmity of the flesh. We do not know exactly what this infirmity is, but we do know that the Galatians knew about it and Paul endured the pain of it while preaching to them. He also steers the letter toward the Galatians' reception of the Gospel and himself. While he was preaching and suffering, they received him as an angel of God and as Christ Himself. He recalls that if they could have, they would have plucked out their own eyes and given them to him. Paul states this to remind them of the truth they had committed themselves to previously. Prior to their turning to religion to make themselves righteous, they had received the Gospel that he preached and believed in the sufficiency of Christ and His righteousness. Paul speaks to them to remind them and alert them to the empty path that they are now on.

3. Paul's Expression (vv. 16–20)

Paul is doubtlessly grieved as he asks if he is their enemy for speaking the truth. The Judaizers had influenced the Galatians with false teaching and effectively shut down Paul's influence on the young church. They wanted the Galatians to solely pay attention to them, not Paul. Paul says it is good to go after the right thing. The Judaizers were after the Galatians but for the wrong reasons: to preach strict Torah observance that they claimed would result in exclusion from the faith if transgressed. Paul ends this section with a metaphor that reveals his true feelings and desire. He says that he travails like a woman in labor until Christ is formed in them. The metaphor here cannot be missed. His emotional state for them is likened to a woman in labor pains. This is how badly he wants to see the Galatians transformed into the image of Christ. This turn toward a false gospel of religion is a move away from that goal. Paul's grief is intense. He states his desire that he would like to be present with the Galatians and change his tone, because now he doubts the authenticity of their faith.

Search the Scriptures

1. How will the "weak and beggarly elements" lead the Galatians into bondage (Galatians 4:8)?
2. How would you evaluate whether a preacher should be received "as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus" (v. 14)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. The Galatians turned to the weak and beggarly elements that led them into bondage again. As followers of Jesus in the twenty-first century, what "weak and beggarly elements" can potentially lead us into bondage?
2. Paul says that he travails until Christ is formed in the Galatians. How can we develop the same passion to see people transformed into the image of Christ?

Liberating Lesson

Many people in our society do not know what the Gospel is. They might say it is a style of music or going to church and getting yourself together. These things are not the same as the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We might not have to deal with the "weak and beggarly elements" the Galatians dealt with, but many things can trip us up and distract us from the true Gospel that sets us free. Wealth, power, relationships, and status can be used as a substitute for justification through Christ. Religion and going to church can be used to substitute for the place of Jesus Christ. These things cannot make us right with God or justified in His sight. None of these things can save you or died for you. To turn to these things is to turn toward religious bondage.

Application For Activation

As a believer, you cannot afford to be led into bondage. Here are a few things you can do to help yourself and others to maintain your freedom through the Gospels:

- Take a minute to write down all of the potential “weak and beggarly” things that personally distract you from the Gospel.
- Pray for new believers that Christ would be formed in them and that they would not be led into bondage.
- Write out a definition of the Gospel and share with three people.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Galatians 4:8–20

8 Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods.

9 But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?

10 Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years.

11 I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.

This section builds on Paul’s argument in Galatians 3:26–4:7. Paul continues his argument that God has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, so that both Jews and Gentiles might be set free and become the children of God. In verse 8, Paul portrays the Galatians’ pre-Christian life in very bleak terms. They did not know God, although they falsely believed their masters were gods. They were pagans and, as such, sacrificed to imaginary deities—gods that were not gods. But now, their present condition differs from their former one, because God knows them and they know Him. Their previous ignorance had been replaced by a personal, experiential knowledge of the true God. Paul emphasizes that they owe their salvation to God’s initiative and that their knowledge was dependent on Him, not them. What matters most is not that we know God, but that He knows us.

Compared to the true God to whom the Galatians have now surrendered, the “gods” the least, “weak and beggarly.” Paul wondered why someone who had been delivered from such evil entities would choose to enter their control again. The Galatians probably did not know better at that time, but now they have no excuse. They knew the slavery they once lived under; in its place they found the liberty

as children of God.

They were turning again to the observance of days, months, times, and years. Paul was not suggesting that it is improper to observe special days in the Jewish or Christian calendar, such as Passover, the Day of Atonement, Christmas, or Easter. Paul's teaching is that while circumcision itself is neither good nor evil, so too the observance of special days is neither mandatory nor inherently wrong. Paul's concern was that the Galatians might be drawn into a religious system where adherence to certain calendar celebrations was necessary to maintain a good standing with God.

Paul had sacrificed much for Galatia and labored there without reservation. Therefore, in verse 11, he expresses fear that all his labor has been wasted. He knew it was possible for true converts to be so distracted from the Gospel of Christ that all his labors to convert them would be thrown away if they reverted back to Judaism. The case was really distressing. Paul had toiled hard to save them from sin and idolatry. Now, legalists had come among them, professing to be the true preachers of the Gospel, and persuaded them that they cannot be saved without keeping ordinances. But this distracted their attention from Christ, who alone could save and keep them saved.

Today we must not downplay or ignore the terrible possibility of the kind of loss Paul feared. Some people today believe that rites and rituals, such as weekly or annual confession, and communion are the minimum requirement for being in good standing in the church. How many people today flock to the church in semiannual pilgrimages at Christmas and Easter, assuming that this is all the Lord requires of them? These holidays are not bad, and they might even strengthen faith if one does not drift into the idea of their essentiality, in which case they become idols and rivals of Christ, fraught with terrible peril to spirituality.

12 Brethren, I beseech you, be as I am; for I am as ye are: ye have not injured me at all.

13 Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first.

14 And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus.

15 Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me.

16 Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?

Paul proceeds to make a personal appeal to his Galatian converts. Using affectionate language, he calls the Galatians "brethren," which means "brothers and sisters," and then he pleads with them. Ministers, particularly pastors, must maintain a proper balance between theological teaching and pastoral concern. "Beseech" (Gk. *deomai*, DEH-oh-my) can mean to long for, or to beg. Paul was no longer arguing but imploring. He reminds them that for their sake, he had become a Gentile, cutting away from the traditions he was raised in and becoming what they are. Therefore, his appeal is that they should not seek to become Jews but become like himself. They should adopt an attitude like his own toward ceremonial Jewish law, which was the understanding that it was fine for Jews to continue to observe Torah tradition but unnecessary for Gentiles who wanted to join the church. The Galatians have accepted the Christian faith, and they must not disown it for the Law, which Paul himself set aside in community with Gentiles. They should emulate Paul by remaining loyal to the truth of the Gospel (2:5, 14), by being dead to and not under the Law (2:19, 3:25), and by living out their faith in Christ (2:20, 3:26–29), and thereby not nullifying the grace of God (2:21) but enjoying all the benefits of the Gospel by means of faith in Christ (3:22). Paul concludes his imperative in verse 12 by assuring them that his appeal is not based on some personal grievance or failure, but on his genuine care and concern for them.

Paul follows up this assurance with the reminder of how they treated him while he was with them earlier. He recalls that he was with them due to an unspecified "weakness of the flesh," an "illness,"

on that first occasion. The exact nature of Paul's illness is undisclosed, but it caused Paul to change his plans and became the opportunity for his preaching the Gospel to the Galatians. They could have rejected Paul and his message on the basis of his illness, out of general superstition (cf. Acts 28:3–6), or as a result of perceiving his illness as caused by demonic activity (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:7). Thus, Paul's sickness was indeed in some sense a "trial" for them, yet in spite of that, the Galatians treated him with high regard and his message, as the truth of God, as though he were "an angel" (Gk. angelos, AHN-ge-los) or even Jesus Christ Himself. This affection toward Paul, when the Galatians might have otherwise rejected him and his message makes all the more perplexing their treatment of him now, as they are apparently resisting Paul and his message and following the infiltrators who were preaching "another gospel" among them. Remembering the kind of welcome he had when he first visited Galatia, Paul could rightly now ask, "Where is then the blessedness ye spake of?" (v. 15). So genuine was their reception, commitment, selflessness, and generosity that Paul said that they would have plucked their own eyes for him (probably a figure of speech to indicate the willingness to meet his needs, rather than an indication that the sickness had to do with Paul's eyes). That affection has now gone. Once considered an angel of God, he is now an enemy because he had preached the true Gospel to them.

**17 They zealously affect you, but not well; yea, they would exclude you, that ye might affect them.
18 But it is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing, and not only when I am present with you.
19 My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you,
20 I desire to be present with you now, and to change my voice; for I stand in doubt of you.**

Paul has more to say about the agitators causing the difficulties in Galatia that distorted the Gospel and damaged the relationship between him and the believers. Paul did not identify them by name, perhaps to not dignify them; he simply referred to them as "they." He accuses this group of earnestly pursuing the Galatians, but not for good reasons. Paul sees them playing a mind game with the Galatians: excluding the Galatians so that the Galatians will earnestly pursue them. Paul concedes that it is good to be zealously affected or have someone concerned about them, but the motive and purpose are important. Paul sees that the Galatians' faith is still young, pointing out that they shouldn't just pursue good things when he is with them. It seems that whoever is with them, whether Paul or this zealous group, can easily influence the Galatians' faith.

Having zeroed on the agitators, Paul now changes his mood and expresses deep concern for the Galatians, in contrast to his opponents' superficial interest. He addresses his hoodwinked flock affectionately as "my little children" (v. 19). Although Paul usually addresses his converts as "brothers and sisters," he occasionally refers them as his "children" when he wants to draw attention to the fact that he was instrumental, as their spiritual father, in bringing them to the new birth of faith (1 Corinthians 4:14; Philemon 10). Here, however, the role of the father is not enough to capture his thought. Such is his personal investment that he compares himself to a mother who must go through the pangs of childbirth again for the sake of her children. This image witnesses to the deep personal anguish Paul felt over the defection of his spiritual offspring in Galatia. The graphic language reveals Paul's deep concern. The false teachers' work has put his own work of transformation in jeopardy, and Paul is in deep anguish to get his converts back on track.

There is no doubt about Paul's meaning as he agonizes deeply for the Galatians. He did not want to suffer a spiritual loss, but instead was anxious that Christ be formed in their hearts. Paul concludes his personal appeal by expressing his desire to be with the Galatians in their time of crisis (4:20). A concerned loved one's presence is most important, appreciated, and needed in time of crisis. Written words, although important, can be cold and even misleading. Paul wanted to assure them of his loving concern. He expresses some uncertainty: "for I stand in doubt of you." His doubt was the uneasiness of being perplexed and baffled.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday

Galatians 4:1-7

Tuesday

1 Kings 2:1-4

Wednesday

2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

Thursday

Luke 9:23-27, 57-62

Friday

Romans 8:1-11

Saturday

Romans 8:12-17

Sunday

Galatians 4:8-20