

“A PERSONAL APPEAL”

Chapters 3-4 of Galatians have featured an extended argument in which Paul has pitted faith against the law as rival means of salvation. He has appealed to the Galatians' own conversion experience. He has used the example of how Abraham experienced salvation. He has spoken of the curse of the law. He has shown the contrast between law and promise. He has used the analogy of heirs who have not yet come into their inheritance. And Paul's point in all of this has been to show the Galatians that salvation can only be by faith alone and not by works of the law. Now, as we come to the last two sections of chapter 4, Paul brings this argument about faith and the law to a close. The last part of the chapter, which we will look at next time, features an allegory that drives the point home. And the passage that we are considering tonight contains a personal appeal to the Galatians, an appeal from a shepherd to his flock, an appeal in which Paul urges the Galatian Christians not to turn away from the gospel that they had first received. As we study this passage tonight, we will consider how its three sections show us three defining marks of a believer in Jesus Christ: *(1) a Christian is someone who has been set free from slavery; (2) a Christian is someone who places a high value upon the ministry of the Word; and (3) a Christian is someone who is being conformed to the likeness of Christ.*

We begin with the first section of our passage, verses 8-11, a section which shows us that a Christian is someone who has been set free from slavery. Paul says that the Galatians were formerly enslaved to false gods, a clear reference to the pagan religion

that they embraced prior to their conversion. And while this way of speaking certainly applies to people who participate in non-Christian religions, it also describes the condition of every human being who does not trust in Jesus Christ. Apart from Christ, we are all enslaved to things that are not gods, gods of our own devising. We worship and serve created things rather than our Creator. As much as we might like to think of ourselves as free, the truth is that in our sin we are enslaved to the desires of our flesh and to whatever things we put in the place of God.

But all of this changes when we come to know Jesus Christ. In Christ we are set free from sin and the hold that it has over us. When we place our trust in Christ we are set free so that we might become slaves to God. Being enslaved to sin is of no benefit to us, but being a slave of God is of the greatest benefit to us. Paul writes about this in his letter to the Romans, where he says:

“When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.” [Rom. 6:20-22]

Becoming a Christian means being set free from slavery to death in order that we might become slaves of righteousness and heirs of eternal life.

In order to emphasize the blessedness of our freedom in Christ, Paul points out that it is not only that believers have come to know God, but that we have come to be known by God. And Paul's purpose in saying this is to emphasize that we cannot come to know God by our own efforts. God is the initiator in salvation. The only reason why a Christian can say that he knows God is because God first knew him.

Now of course, God knows all people in a general sense, but that is not what Paul is talking about here. Rather, he is talking about being known by God in the sense of being the object of his special affection and grace. This is the same idea that Paul expresses elsewhere when he says that God "foreknew" the elect. God set his love upon us before time began, and at our conversion we come to personally experience this love. It is in this sense that Paul can speak of the Galatians having come to be known by God.

The Galatians had been set free from their slavery to false gods. They had come to be known by the living and true God. But by entertaining the teaching of the Judaizers, the false teachers who were troubling them, they were considering the possibility of turning back again to that which had formerly enslaved them. They were in danger of doing what the Lord spoke of through the prophet Jeremiah when he said:

"my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water." [Jer. 2:13]

The Galatians were in danger of turning away from the life-giving water that is found in the gospel and going back to a manmade religion that offers them nothing but death. We need to realize that this is exactly what we are doing whenever we turn away from Christ and run back to the sin from which he set us free. We are running back into slavery.

Paul refers to the Galatians' former way of life in paganism as "the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world." But it was not paganism that they were being tempted to return to. The Judaizers were urging them to embrace the Mosaic law, not pagan rituals. The observances that Paul mentions in verse 10 were Jewish observances, not pagan ones. Yet Paul sees their embrace of the law as a way of salvation as virtually the same thing as a return to their former life of paganism. Why? Because both are based upon the same elementary principles. Both are founded upon a legalistic principle, the principle that says "Do and live." They are both works-oriented.

The first section of our passage concludes with a statement of concern from Paul, as he writes: "I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain." Imagine your pastor saying something like that to you. It would be very unsettling, wouldn't it? Paul obviously wanted the Galatians to see the danger of their situation. Their conduct was inconsistent with the gospel, and this caused Paul to wonder if they were truly regenerate at all. This shows us that when a professed Christian begins to turn back to the things that formerly enslaved him the credibility of his Christian profession comes under question.

We turn now to the second section of our passage, verses 12-16, a section in which we see that a Christian is someone who places a high value upon the ministry of the Word.

Paul now turns to speak about his relationship with the Galatians while he was ministering to them. He urges them to become like him, in the sense that he is free from the law, and he reminds them that while he was with them he became like them. Of course, this does not mean that Paul lived like a pagan or compromised his faith while he was with the Galatians. Rather, it simply means that he had sympathy and respect for them. He accepted them for what they were and lived among them in order to lead them to Christ.

Next Paul gives us a little bit of information about the circumstances of his visit to Galatia. Apparently he did not intend to be among the Galatians at all, but was forced to remain with them due to some kind of bodily ailment. (Notice, by the way, how the Lord used Paul's health problem in order to achieve his purposes. Here is yet another biblical example of the providence of God over all the affairs of men.) The precise nature of this ailment remains unknown, but some have suggested that it could be the same thing as the "thorn in the flesh" that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 12. Whatever it was, it was in some sense a trial for the Galatians. Perhaps this refers to the burden of having to care for Paul during his time of sickness. Paul also says that his sickness was something for which they might easily have scorned or despised him. We know that many ancient Greeks considered sickness to be a sign of divine displeasure. But Paul reminds the Galatians that they did not respond to him that way. Rather, they welcomed him as an

angel, or as Christ Jesus himself. And why? It was because of Paul's message. It was because of the gospel that he preached. Their reception of Paul was due to their reception of the Christ that he preached. This brings to mind the words of Jesus, when he said to his disciples: "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me." [Mt. 10:40]

This points us to an important identifying mark of any true believer in Jesus Christ. True Christians place great value upon the preaching of God's Word. A Christian will leave a church that he has been a part of for years and years to find another church if he has become convinced that his old church is not faithfully preaching God's Word. Christians have an appetite for the preached Word. And well they should. For the preached Word is the primary means by which the Lord feeds our faith and nurtures us in his grace.

It was Paul's message, his preaching, that first endeared him to the Galatians. But now they were repulsed by that very same message. This is what Paul means in verse 16 when he asks, "Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?" Take note of what had happened. It was not Paul's message that had changed. It was the Galatians who had changed when they fell under the influence of the Judaizers. This is the inevitable result of false teaching, false beliefs, false notions of what is right and good and true. Such things always lead us away from God's truth. They turn us into enemies of the truth.

This brings us to the third section of our passage, verses 17-20, in which we see that a Christian is someone who is being conformed to the likeness of Christ. In these verses Paul sets a contrast between himself and the Judaizers. The Judaizers were interested in the Galatians, but their interest was not for a good purpose. They wanted to subject the Galatians to slavery to the law once again. And their ultimate motive in this was a selfish one: they wanted the Galatians to make much of them. This is a perennial sign of false teaching. False teachers are focused upon winning a name for themselves. They call attention to their accomplishments instead of calling attention to Christ and what he has accomplished for us.

Paul's interest in the Galatians was different than that of the Judaizers. His concern was to see Christ formed in them. This is the goal of all true Christian ministry. Paul writes of it elsewhere with these words:

“Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.” [Col. 1:28-29]

The supreme desire of a faithful preacher is not that his hearers would make much of him. It is not to make them into his devoted and doting followers. Rather, it is that he might see Christ being formed in their hearts. As Calvin writes in his commentary on this

passage, “If ministers wish to do anything, let them labour to form Christ, not to form themselves, in their hearers.”

As we reflect upon this personal appeal from Paul to the churches of Galatia, we see three characteristics of a believer in Jesus Christ: freedom from bondage; delight in God’s Word; and conformity to Christ. But we also see how false teaching leads people to turn away from these things. And take note of this: false teaching includes anything that leads us away from the Christ who is presented to us in the gospel. We can be led astray by false teachers in a church, in the world, or in our own rebellious hearts. Whatever its source, false teaching sets its sights upon the three Christian traits that are set forth in this passage. False teaching seeks to bring us back into slavery. False teaching causes us to despise the true preaching of the gospel. And false teaching causes us to make much of men instead of being conformed to the likeness of Christ. Is it any wonder that Paul would say that he was utterly perplexed at what the Galatians were doing? May God grant us grace, that no one may ever have reason to say such a thing about us.