

Freedom in Christ

Passage: Galatians 4:8-20; Galatians 6:11; 2 Corinthians 10:8-12; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; Ephesians 5:15, 17 | Speaker: Steve Grothoff | Date: 261011

SUMMARY

Steve Grothoff continues the Galatians series in 4:8-20, where Paul's tone turns from stern argument to a pastor's plea. Having come to know God, or rather to be known by him, the Galatians were drifting back to the worthless principles they once served, and Paul feared his labor was in vain. Idolatry is anything placed above God, and Paul lives out the freedom he preaches instead of imposing rules. Teachers who courted followers for themselves led the church astray, but Paul only wanted them to follow Christ well, like a parent in labor until Christ is formed in them.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- God knows us and loves us, so returning to old habits that never satisfied us makes no sense.
- Idolatry is putting anything above God, whether social media, sports, jobs, possessions, family, or even knowledge about God.
- Paul practices what he preaches and becomes all things to all people for the sake of the gospel, without changing the message.
- Leaders should want people to follow Christ well, not to gather followers for themselves; devotion matters more than numbers.
- As a church we hold the whole truth of Scripture without compromise, stay unified in it, and receive God's word as Christ's message rather than critique the preacher.

Introduction

All right. Good morning, everybody.

All right. So you guys will realize that I've got this monster of a Bible here instead of what I usually have. I am swapping. I was doing New King James and it's a little bit easier for me for studying, but it's a little bit easier for me to read out of the ESV for in congregational settings. So it hopefully will be a little less wordy and a little bit easier to understand. So bear with me as I go through this, because it's like driving a new vehicle that you've never driven before. I'm used to my old one. I'm used to the way it works. I'm used to looking at it. So it's going to be a little bit different. I might be times where I look and I'm like, hold on. I've got to figure out where I'm at again. So if you guys would stand with me, we are going to be in Galatians 4. Galatians 4, verses 8 through 20. It's also smaller print, so I have to hold it closer. Getting old.

Scripture Reading: Galatians 4:8-20

Verse 8. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, now how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid I have labored over you in vain. Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I have also become as you are. You did me no wrong.

You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first. And 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.

What 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. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you. My children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you. I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

Opening Prayer

Father, as we get into your word, we're going to get into seeing just the heart of Paul and the heart, honestly, of a pastor, of a guy who is just seeking to shepherd and guide. And, Father, that there are people that are present with these people that, when Paul is not, that are leading them astray. So, Father, I just pray that that is not the case with any of your sheep. Father, that they can stay true to you. Father, that they can know the truth. And, Father, that they can stay firm in the truth and not steer away from you. Father, we thank you for your word. Father, we thank you for this time together. And, Father, we just pray that this message is your message, not mine, not anybody else's, Father, but yours.

We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. All right. So, before we took a break from Galatians, we had some pretty stern words from Paul.

Where We Left Off: Paul's Changing Tone

He was pretty rough on them, the first three chapters.

In places somewhat aggressive of a tone that he used. And, beginning of chapter three, he says, oh, foolish Galatians. I mean, we read that and we don't think there's much of it. But, in the time that it was in, in the context of what he's saying, he's like, you dumb rednecks. What's wrong with you guys? Here's what I'm trying to tell you guys. He was very stern. He was very, he was almost rude with the way that he was talking to them. But, he was doing it to get their attention. And, then last week, we began to see a bit of a transition in Paul's tone. And, he starts referring to them as the children of God. He starts saying, now that you have accepted the gospel, you are God's children.

You're loved by him. You're cared for by him. He starts, he changes his tone a little bit. And, then in this week's passage, we begin to see a little bit more of that personal heart of Paul. For these churches in Galatia, as he voices some of his concerns about them. He's given them the, the, the, the very dogmatic, here's what you need to believe in the first few chapters. And, now we see more of that, like, pleading with them in a way.

Why Go Back to What Never Worked? (Verses 8-11)

In verses 8 through 11, we see that he starts this off by reminding them that returning to their former beliefs and their former religions and their worldly way of living puts them at risk of turning away from God fully. He says, why are you returning to the things that you knew didn't work for you? He says, you have come to know God. Rather, you have come to be known by God. God knows who you

are. He loves you. He cares for you. He's going back to the, the message from last week. He's, he says, God cares for you. He knows you. He wants you to be his. He says, so why do you turn away and go back to your old way of living?

As we can reflect on our own lives, how come it is sometimes we are so quick to return to something that at one point seemed so comfortable to us, but knowing full well that it has never truly satisfied or fulfilled us? No matter what that was, that it could have been a sin. It could have just been something that was, that was fruitless in your life. But why are we so quick to go back to those things? How often have we reverted back to old habits that we know don't work when we know that Christ does, when we know that what Christ has done for us does work? If there was a light switch on the wall over here and I said, hey guys, there's a light switch over here. It doesn't do anything. But every time that I walked through a door to come over here, I would, or come up here, I'd flip that switch on. And like, everybody would be like, what are you doing? There's no point. That switch isn't connected to anything. That's, it's kind of the same thing. Like, why would we constantly keep trying to do something, thinking that it's going to do something for us when we know that it doesn't work?

He tells them, you were enslaved to those that by nature were not gods. And then he says, why have you returned to the elementary principles, the worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?

He's, he's saying, why are you guys turning back to worshiping the things and turning back to putting a, to idolizing these things that did you no good to begin with?

We talked a couple of weeks ago when we were talking about worship, what idolatry was,

Idolatry: Anything Above God

and that it's not just little wooden stone or metal statues. It's not just things like that, but it's, it's any time that we put a higher importance or a higher priority on anything other than God. Anything other than God.

The world's full of distractions vying for our attention, but no matter what we do, we should keep Christ at the center of everything that we do. Christ should be at the heart of everything that we do. Now, it's not to say that these things are inherently evil, but when we place them above our importance that we have for God, they can become an idol. I'm going to give you a very unexhaustive list. There are many more things, but in our time and in the world that we live in today, things such as social media, TV shows, sports, video games, hobbies, jobs, possessions, and even sometimes our own spouse or our own children can become idols to us. They can be the things that are more important to us than staying focused on God and what he wants for our lives. I also mentioned that sometimes that

can be just wanting to learn more about God and just having this knowledge. You have a knowledge of God, but you don't have an application for it in your life. You know these things, but you know them for the reason of being able to say, well, I know this and you don't. That happens. It's easy to do. It's easy to fall into the hole of, well, I know all of these things, so I'm a better Christian than you because I know these things and you don't. That's not true because God tells us to just have a childlike faith. Now, there's nothing wrong with digging deeper. There's nothing wrong with knowing more, wanting to know more. But really and truly at the root of it all, what we need to remember is the simple gospel.

A Region of Thousands of Gods

Now, the things that Paul was talking about specifically was that in this region of Galatia, there were hundreds of various gods from various, various cultural backgrounds. You had the Galatians, which were the Gauls from like Scotland, Ireland, things like that. So you had a pantheon of Gallic gods, a pantheon of Celtic gods, Gaelic gods, Britain gods, and Brythonic gods.

Each of them had their own hundreds of gods, and then they all came together. So there were almost thousands of gods that they worshipped in this region. Paul had a lot of work to do. He had a lot of people that he had to teach them like, you guys don't, none of that matters. Quit focusing on those things. Focus on Christ because Christ is the only one that matters. That's why he says there in verse 10, you observe days and months and seasons and years. There were multiple feasts. If you think you had thousands of gods, they had probably just about every day, somebody was celebrating some feast to some god that wasn't the true god. They were celebrating in memory of these former gods. Now, they might have been doing the Christian thing too, but they were also focusing their minds back to the way that they were.

We read there in verse 11, Paul says,

Labored in Vain (Verses 11-14)

I'm afraid I may have labored over you in vain. He almost, I don't know what to do, guys. Like, I feel like everything I did for you was for nothing. If this is what you're going to do, if this is how you're going to act, you guys were doing so good and I left, somebody else came in and tried to tell you something else and I feel like everything I did was for nothing.

Then we read there in 12 through 14, he says, I entreat you, I beg you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are.

Paul Under Criticism

Paul faced a lot of problems. With the people that he shared the gospel with. Paul ran into a lot of issues. Paul had a lot of people. Now, think also the fact that he wasn't able to be in person like this. He wasn't able to call them on the phone and say, hey guys, so I heard there's some problems. Let's talk about that. It was a one-way communication at a time. It was a letter. He would send a letter after he got a letter from one of the church leaders and was like, hey, things are going sideways here. We need your help. It would be months at a time, sometimes years, before the answer would come back. He didn't have the option of being right there in person with them to be able to say things to them to their face. Sometimes these are the same kind of problems that anybody that lives under constant criticism can face. Anybody that lives under the spotlight of being somebody that people look to or listen to or pastors fit into this also. And we see throughout his letters sometimes that Paul deals with people thinking three different things about him. One, that he was hypocritical. He talks one way, but he acts completely different when we see him in person. The things that he preaches are so stern and so pointed. But when we see him in person, he's not like that at all.

People had issues with his authority. He says, my authority only comes through Christ. He's like, I'm not up here telling you anything that's from my own words. I'm just telling you what God has told me. And number three, they often accused him of not being warm and loving. Again, we read in the first three chapters, his letters were pretty, this letter was pretty stern, pretty dogmatic. If you were reading this letter and Paul had wrote this letter to you and it was personally written to you, I would probably get to the beginning of chapter three and be like, who does this guy think he is calling me names like that? I'm not going to read the rest of this. Because how easy would that be? How easy was it that people would just say, well, I don't want to listen to him. He doesn't say, he says one thing, he does another. He's not the same person when he's with us as what he writes to us. And this all three gets bundled up pretty good. And there's a section in 2 Corinthians chapter 10, verses 8 through 12,

Authority and Integrity: 2 Corinthians 10:8-12

where he says, For even if I boast a little too much, that's the next one, sorry. For even if I boast a little too much in our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and for not destroying you, I will not be ashamed. My authority is not my own. What I tell you guys is from God, from God, from the Lord. The Lord gave it to you, so I'm not ashamed to share it with you.

I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters, for they say his letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech is of no account.

Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present.

That's what Paul is trying to explain to them. He's like, guys, this whole point of these verses is, guys, I tell you something and I live by it. I don't tell you something and then go and do my own thing. I tell you this and then I live by it. I want you guys to see that what I'm telling you is how I live also. I become, become as I am, for I also became like you. Paul's just telling them, he's like, guys, I just want you to live in the freedom of Christ.

That's how I live. Look at the, look at, look at how I live. I live in the freedom of Christ. He says, you did no wrong to me. What you've done is, is okay. The fact that you guys were, that I came and, and I didn't, I didn't belittle you guys with, these are the things that I do. You guys should be doing them too. He, he said, I, he says, I, I have become as you are. Now, this is the verse that I was talking about.

All Things to All People: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

First Corinthians nine, 19 through 23, Paul writes to the Corinthian church and he says, for though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all that I might win more of them. To the Jews, I became as a Jew in order to win the Jews. To those under the law, I became as one under the law, though my, though not myself being under the law, that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of God, that I might win those outside the law. To the weak, I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means, I might save some. I do it for the sake of the gospel, that I might share with them in its blessings. Paul doesn't go and immediately start imposing his rules on people. He shows up and he says, hey, I'm going to live the way that you guys, I'm going to live with you guys, but I'm going to live my way, but in your all settings. I'm going to be, I don't want to, I want to, I want to ingratiate myself with you guys, with who I am, but I also want to show you guys that the way that I live is different than the way that you live. And here's how it's different.

Flatterers and Exclusive Groups

The Galatian people had been led astray by a group of people trying to come in and become the spiritual authorities in that region. And Paul had left, Paul had preached his, the gospel, and what they thought was a gospel, not the gospel, and said, well, Paul was kind of right, but here's where he was wrong.

These men were coming in and convincing new believers to follow the teachings, to follow their teachings instead of Paul's teachings. Well, Paul said this, but really it kind of means more like this.

They were using flattering words to try and entice people to follow them. They wanted to amass a following for themselves. They didn't, when they weren't looking to share the gospel with people, they were looking to have people follow them. They figured the more people that follow me, the better of a person that they will think that I am, and the more people that I can win also. I want to be influential because I have enough people following me that people will say, oh, well, this guy's got a hundred people that say that what he thinks is right.

And he says there, again, like I said, it's a different one for me here. Verse 17, they want to shut you out that you may make much of them. They were trying to form their own exclusive groups like, well, you should follow me because what I believe is this, and what I say is this, and what I say is better than what this guy is saying. They were trying to form exclusive groups, cults, if you will, of people that were claiming to be better Christians because they also followed the Jewish law and Jewish tradition. Well, you guys might be Christians, but we're better Christians because we also do this. No, Paul's trying to tell them, like, the gospel is simple, guys.

We see there in verse 13 that Paul suffered some kind of ailment.

Paul's Bodily Ailment

This may have also been the thorn in the flesh that he spoke about or the other times that he spoke of the trial by flesh that he was dealing with. The wording there, because of a bodily ailment, gives the connotation that Paul was in that region as the result of his ailment. He was there for some reason, some kind of treatment, or some kind of way to fix or at least alleviate some of the problems of his ailment. There are people that believe that maybe Paul had malaria at that time, that the increased elevation would help with the fevers of malaria. There were also people that believed that he suffered some possible extreme arthritis, probably that could have been a medical condition from birth, or it could have been a result of the multiple beatings and stoning attempts that he faced. He was probably pretty sore. So, again, that increased elevation would have helped with the inflammation for him. There's also people that say that he had a possible eye condition. And we read in Galatians 6.11, he says, look at what large letters I'm writing. Maybe he had some sort of eye condition that brought him there. We don't know. We don't know what Paul's condition was, but what we know is that whatever it was, it is the reason that he was there sharing the gospel with the Galatians.

Welcomed as an Angel of God (Verses 14-16)

Verse 14 tells us that the Galatians took Paul in. They listened to his teachings, and they became believers. You took me in as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What he means there is as Christ Jesus would. You took me in the way that Christ would have taken me in. You guys were a good example of

Christ in my life.

Paul then asks them two somewhat difficult questions.

He says, what then has become of your blessedness?

What happened? You guys were all in. He says there in the next verse that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. Again, possibly Paul had an eye condition. You guys would have, you guys were so ready and willing. You guys were so on fire for the gospel. You guys were ready to do anything for it. What happened? What happened to that? Where'd that fire go? What put that fire out?

And then in verse 16, he says, am I now your enemy because I tell you the truth? He had people that were fighting him. He had people that were pushing back against him saying, hey, you guys, these people are wrong. The gospel I am sharing with you is correct.

He had pushback, obviously, from people.

But what he says there is he's like, I'm telling you the same message that I did before. So what's changed? Why are you now hating me for the same message that I came and preached to you guys and you accepted so, so willingly and so lovingly? Paul wasn't looking for more people to follow his version of the gospel. That wasn't it at all.

This is what the other guys were doing. Paul just wanted them to become better Christians.

That's what he says there.

Spiritual Children: The Pain of Turning Away

And as we go down there in verse 19, he says, my little children for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth. I'm laboring for you. All of these things that I'm doing, it pains me to see you guys turning so quickly from something that I feel like you were doing so well with. How often is that true? How often do we have children or people in our own lives that we have reached out to and shared the gospel with or people that we have helped bring up, whether just in life or even in a spiritual sense, our spiritual children, people that we have raised up and then we see so quickly them turn and go the opposite direction or turn away from it. How much that pains us. Like, what did I do? What did I say wrong? What was I not doing correctly?

Paul just tells them, I want you guys to love Christ the way that I've shown you to love Christ, the way that I've shown you that I love Christ. I want you guys to have that.

Paul wasn't looking for increasing his numbers to validate what he was doing. Paul just wanted the people that were following Christ to do it and do it well. Well, that's all we can ask of anybody that we pour into.

Do you follow Christ well? I don't want you to follow my example. I want you to follow my example that I give you of what Christ gave me an example of. It's not what I do. It's what Christ has done for me and what I'm showing you Christ has done. If we could keep this many people right here and if everybody here came to a deeper and more intentional love for God, we don't need anybody else here. It is a quality over quantity thing. It's not about how many people are here. It's about how much the people that are here truly, truly have a deep relationship with Christ.

That's all Paul was wanting from these people. Guys, I don't need a bunch of you. I want every one of you to hear what I'm saying and I want every one of you to follow me, but what I want more than anything is for the ones that do it to do it well and to love well.

And he says there in verse 20,

Perplexed Without Being There (Verse 20)

I just wish I could be here. I just wish I could be there with you guys to talk to you guys. I just wish that I could be there in person because I can't quite understand what it is that has led you astray so quickly. I'm perplexed about you, he says. So through the years of very tough relationships that I had gone through and then at the beginnings of Hallie and I getting together, we came to the conclusion that it is a terrible, terrible idea to try and have any hard conversation through text message or over the phone. It's impossible. How hard is it to get the inflection and see the body language from somebody when you're not there with them? How much different, how much more personal is the conversation? So there have been times that she and I have had things that we needed to discuss and it was like, hey, listen, we're just gonna, let's put a pin in this and let's talk about this when we're both together. Let's talk about this when I'm home. I was gone two weeks at a time. I was gone for two weeks, home for two weeks, for two years. We had a lot of things that, and we were new in a relationship where we both had come out of a very difficult one before that. We had a lot of stuff going on. It was difficult, but you know how hard it is on day two of being gone to say, hey, we really need to talk about this and say, well, it's gonna have to wait till we can see each other in person. It's difficult, but that's what Paul is saying here too is he's like, guys, I can't express to you enough in a letter what it is that I'm trying to say. It's why he led on so strong at the beginning with how rough he was, how hard he was and stern he was hitting at these things. He's like, I just need you guys to understand

what it is I'm telling you. And he hits them with it hard at the beginning to get their attention and now we see him kind of moving back from that and easing up a little bit and more of the, okay, now you know what's wrong. Let's fix that.

So how can we apply that

Point 1: Embrace the Whole Truth

in our lives or in our church here today, 2,000 years later?

Number one, as a church, we must embrace the whole truth of the Bible in a way that no one else seems to want to do these days.

We need to be uncompromising in the truth. No matter how difficult, intolerant, unloving, or politically incorrect it may seem to the rest of the world, this is the truth. Everybody else thinks there's truth elsewhere. This is the truth. And a lot of times the things that we talk about in here can seem unloving to people that aren't ready to hear it.

That's why we need to share the truth in love. But we don't need to waver in our convictions just because someone doesn't agree with it. We don't need to backpedal and, well, I mean, I didn't mean it like that. Like, well, if it says it here, then that's what we need to be leading with. If it's uncomfortable to hear it stings, but it's biblical, then it's non-negotiable.

There are plenty of things in this world that people believe that are contrary to what this says.

Well, I'll tell you right now, this is right and they are wrong.

That's all there is to it.

Point 2: Be Unified in the Truth

The next step then is becoming a church that not only embraces the truth, but is also unified in the truth.

That unity means that we are focused on Christ and His authority, the Scriptures. We are focused on that.

John Stott: Receive the Word

I'm going to close with this. I've got a somewhat lengthy quote from John Stott, a book I was reading of his a while back. I honestly cannot remember the name of it because I write down quotes in a book and I've got a bunch of quotes and this is one of them that I forgot to put the reference to. And then I'm going to leave you with a Bible verse also. So John Stott says, in the church today, there is far too little regard for the Word of God.

Frequently, what interests the contemporary congregation most is the preacher's technique, mannerisms, wardrobe, or voice. They are concerned with how long he preaches and what they can hear from him. Can they understand him? Do they agree with him? And often, when the sermon is over, they are likely to criticize it and pull it to pieces. Certainly, there is cause for criticism if the preacher is unfaithful to his commission, if he makes no attempt to preach biblically, or if he himself is not following God's Word. But when he expounds the Word of God, the proper reaction of the congregation should be to receive the message rather than criticize it, not on the authority of the preacher, but on the authority of Christ, whose message it actually is. Most Christian congregations today could be more alert, more humble, and more hungry when hearing the exposition of God's Word. What should matter to the people is not the pastor's appearance or performance, but whether Christ is speaking through him. What should matter to the pastor is not the people's favor, but that Christ is formed in them. The church needs people who, in listening to their pastor, listen for the message of Christ, and pastors who, in laboring among the people, look for the image of Christ in them. Only when the pastor and the people keep their eyes on Christ will their mutual relationships be healthy, profitable, and pleasing to Almighty God.

And Ephesians 5, 15, and 17 says, Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Closing Prayer

Father, we thank you. We thank you for your Word, and Father, we just, as we hear some of these messages, Father, that's, I hope that people are as convicted by the things that Paul was saying as I was, as I was reading this, and Father, that there are times that I feel like I am not doing what I should be doing properly, that I am looking and being distracted by other parts of the world of the world that are not yours, that are not, that I'm looking at, and it's not with the heart of Christ. So, Father, just keep us all focused on you. Father, keep us focused on you individually, but Father, also unified as a church. Keep us focused on you. Father, we love you. Father, we thank you for your son.

And Father, we just, we just ask that as we go out into the world this week that we can do exactly that, that we can walk worthy to be called Christians, that we can live in a way that shows others that other people will ask questions and look at us and say, what do they have that I don't have?

So, Father, we thank you.

And we ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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