

Parson to Person
(Galatians 4 – Part 2)
(The Apostle and His “Children”)

“Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’ Therefore, you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.

But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods. But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain.

Brethren, I urge you to become like me, for I became like you. You have not injured me at all. You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus. What then was the blessing you enjoyed? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me. Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?

They zealously court you, but for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them. But it is good to be zealous in a good thing always, and not only when I am present with you. My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is

formed in you, I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you” (Galatians 4:1–20).

Context

The Galatians were a mixed group of Jews and Gentiles. Paul knew this. Inasmuch as his audience was Gentile by mission, he, as a Jew, illustrated and taught from a Jewish perspective.

Apparently, Paul’s teaching style was no crisis for the Gentiles in the then-Roman empire. This is highlighted by the fact that Paul did not teach background from the Old Testament when proclaiming the Gospel. It seems he did not find it necessary.

Paul had a correct presupposition concerning those in Syria, Cyprus, Asia Minor (where Galatia was located), Macedonia, Achaia, the central Mediterranean and Italy. They all had synagogues, and the people knew of Israel, the Jews, and the Law. Therefore, such topics as the law as a tutor needed no background/backfill for the Galatians to understand the illustration. We on the other hand need help!

Pagan Background

Paul wrote, *“when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods.”* This statement was Gentile in nature. It did not and does not ignore early Israeli pagan engagement—think the worship of Baal, Ashtoreth, Molech, Chemosh, etc. It was understood as a previous Gentile pagan practice—think the worship of Zeus, Poseidon, Athena, Apollo, Aphrodite, Hermes, Pan, etc. Therefore, as we study the passage, we must interpret it in light of the Gentiles.

Paul was contrasting the Gentile deliverance from paganism to the legalism taught by the Judaizers. He was pointing out that the Galatians were being led into another form of self-help

“righteousness.” Namely, observing the Jewish calendar of days, months, seasons, and years.

The Right and The Wrong

Observing the Jewish Feast Days—think Passover, Firstfruits, Pentecost, etc.—is not condemned. However, keeping/observing these days as a requirement of the now abolished Law, in order to impress God, attain righteousness, or maintain righteousness, is an affront to the cross. Therefore, Paul wrote, *“I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain”* (vs. 11). All works-based righteousness needed to be condemned. It needs to be condemned today as well.

Paul wrote, *“Brethren, I urge you to become like me, for I became like you”* (vs. 12a). He was free and wanted the Galatians to experience the same. He was no longer under the Law (the tutor)! The Galatians were not under the Law—and never were! Paul was just like them in that sense—free. Moreover, that freedom had *“not injured [Paul] at all”* (vs. 12 b). He ate with them and enjoyed life with them. Doing so did not harm Paul. It was no violation of God’s liberating standards. Therefore, being with them, as he was, did not diminish his righteousness—not *“at all.”*

Appealing to the Galatians’ Memory

Paul reminded the Galatians how happy they were to hear the Gospel—and how they had received him. He wrote, *“You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus”* (vss. 13–14). What had changed? Why then were they turning from the apostle?

He asked, *“What then was the blessing you enjoyed? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own*

eyes and given them to me. Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth? (vss. 15–16). Why depart from the Gospel to a perverted false hope? Was Paul’s gentle rebuke cause for them to become his enemy? He was looking out for them. He was attending to them as a father and mother would a child (vs. 19).

The Galatians enjoyed Paul immensely. He was the messenger who brought them the truth. In fact, when he came, he came in weakness. Nonetheless, they received him gladly—even as an angel. Why then the change of heart? What had polluted their thinking?

The Answer

The answer was simple: the Judaizers. These evil workers were following Paul from town to town undermining the liberty found in the Gospel. They had perverted the Gospel of Christ in exchange for a *“different gospel”* (1:6–7). Of these seducers Paul wrote, *“They zealously court you, but for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them”* (vs. 17).

At Home or Abroad

Paul wanted the Galatians to remember the lessons he taught them and defend the faith—zealously. He wanted them to remain faithful when he was present—and when he was absent. Therefore, he wrote, *“it is good to be zealous in a good thing always, and not only when I am present with you”* (vs. 18).

The Galatians needed to *“note those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine you learned and avoid them”* (see Romans 16:17–18). The Judaizers were false teachers and needed stern rebuke themselves. Moreover, they were to be rejected.

Affection and Discipline

Every good parent teaches and trains their children. Paul was no exception. We have no record of Paul having a son or daughter himself, but, with certainty, he loved the Church as a mother and/or father would. He served them in similar fashion. For this reason, he desired to change his tone from stern rebuke to gentle parenting. He wrote, *“My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you, I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you”* (vss. 19–20).

Paul’s doubts were genuine. He was greatly concerned that their freedom in Christ would be stolen. *“This occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out [their] liberty which [they had] in Christ Jesus, [in order to] bring [them] into bondage)”* (2:4).

Christ Formed in You

The born-again experience is not our being formed from without by rules and regulations; it is “Christ being formed in us” (vs. 19). Religion always attempts to clothe from without; relationship with Christ is transformation from within. This is the glory of the New Covenant.

I love you all,
Pastor Paul