



Galatians 4:8-20

Gospel Beauty and Its Foe

January 8, 2023

We are jumping back into Galatians today. Our current plan is to wrap up Galatians by the beginning of March, cover a few topics over a few weeks after that, and then do the book of Job in the spring, some Proverbs in the summer, and start Matthew in the fall (Lord willing.)

We haven't been in Galatians since November, so just to quickly bring everybody up to speed, Paul is writing this letter to a church in Galatia that he had planted by going to the synagogue and preaching the message of Jesus.

He preached this message:

Acts 13:38 Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, 39 and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

And this is amazing, liberating news. They don't have to struggle to follow the Jewish ceremonies, and kosher laws, and holidays to have acceptance from God. That has now been purchased by Jesus and is theirs by faith in Jesus. We can put our trust in the finished work of Christ on the cross, and we don't have to follow religious ceremonies to get on God's good side. Jesus did the work of getting us on God's good side, if we believe.

The Old Testament sacrifices found their fulfillment in Jesus, circumcision was no longer necessary, all of the ceremonies and temple observances and special days are done with now that Jesus has come. The only way to the Father is Jesus, and the shadows of Jesus like sacrifices and dietary laws aren't needed anymore.

Jews and Gentiles in Galatia receive that amazing news with thanksgiving, they are merged into one church, unified in Jesus. But immediately, some teachers from Jerusalem, the Judaizers come to town.

And their message is:

“Unless you are circumcised...you cannot be saved.” (Acts 15:1).

They preached that you are saved by the Gospel of Jesus plus observing the ceremonies in the law of Moses.

According to the Judaizers, they would have to follow the ceremonies and kosher laws and feast days after all.

And many of the Galatians who at first seemed to embrace the message of Christ started to go back to the ceremonial law as the grounds for their salvation. They were trusting in Jesus, but began to trust in Jesus plus themselves, plus their observances. And Paul sees this as deadly because if you don't trust Jesus alone, you are building your life and eternity on a crumbling foundation.

So Paul, in this letter, doesn't hold back. Paul calls them foolish (Galatians 3:1), tells them someone has bewitched them, or cast a spell on them - his concern is that this Galatian church is losing the most important thing: reliance on the death and resurrection of Jesus alone to make them right with God.

And we need to listen to this, too, because we are always looking for some way to earn our way to God, to be better than others. We have a hard time stomaching that we can't earn it, it's almost too good to be true, so we drift from believing it.

So we pick up in Galatians 4:

Galatians 4:8-20 “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. 9 But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?”

So Paul in this immediate context turns to the Gentile believers and he reminds them that before they came to know and be known by God in Jesus, they were enslaved by those that are not gods. And he uses language like this to describe the worship of idols and demons elsewhere:

1 Corinthians 8:4-6 “4 Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” 5 For although

there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”— 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

So Paul tells these Galatian gentile believers that they used to worship idols and demons. They called them gods, and so Paul uses their description, but in the context makes it clear that there is no God but one. These “not really gods” of verse 8 in Galatians 4.

And these Gentile believers used to be enslaved to these gods that aren’t really gods. And now they are turning back to them.

How are they turning back to them? Are they going back to occult practices? Are they going back to Zeus worship? Are they worshipping demons? What does this return to paganism look like for them?

Galatians 4:10 You observe days and months and seasons and years!

Paul says that in turning to the Jewish ceremonial law, they are turning back to demons.

Imagine the shock of the Judaizers to here this - not only is their doctrine that everybody should observe the ceremonial law wrong, it is demonic.

They thought it was good - they thought it made people more holy, that it made people complete.

There are often people among us who think that the most strict standard is the most holy. So they make huge sacrifices, they give up a lot, they deprive themselves, they are diligent. And there’s a lot of sunk cost in that, so they can get protective of those things they do.

But Paul says it’s so bad that it may have made the whole endeavor of leading the Galatians to Jesus not worth it because they are leaving the faith:

11 I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

You’ll feel this at some point if you haven’t already as a Christian. The pain of investing in someone, caring for them, teaching them, leading them, parenting them, only to see

them throw it away. And we can feel like it must be my fault that my kid rebelled, or that my convert didn't persevere, or my friends don't stay faithful. But Paul experienced that too.

So our fervor to see them with Christ is good, but our sense of guilt when they walk away often isn't. Our lack of trust that Christ holds them better than we do is not healthy.

So they are in a bad place.

Not because they're embracing what we picture when we think of demon worship. Not because they are breaking commandments.

They are embracing legalism, which is the idea that forgiveness from God comes from our works, acceptance from God is because of Jesus plus following some ceremonies and doing the right things. It is saying the finished work of Jesus is not finished, and I have to finish it with something else.

And it may look holy because it makes your life look so different, it makes you look so obedient. But it's bad, it's demonic.

What makes this legalism so bad?

It's not just that people are following certain feast days. In other passages, Paul says it's fine to keep the Jewish feasts, it's fine to keep the kosher law, it's fine to get circumcised¹. The issue wasn't that they were doing those things.

You can eat or not eat whatever you want. You can celebrate or not celebrate any good holiday you want. You can eat or not eat, drink or not drink, observe or not observe - those things don't matter.

Romans 14:7 “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

But what was going on here is that people said that those things really matter, they matter so much that you're not a true Christian or an elite Christian if you don't do those things.

¹ See Romans 14:1-12

They relied on them to make them right with God.

Paul will say in Galatians 5:4

Galatians 5:4 “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.”

And Paul has already said in Galatians 3:10:

Galatians 3:10 “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse”

They were adding their works to the finished work of Jesus, and saying that Jesus’s work is not enough to get us forgiven or to unify us.

But this kind of thinking and living is really bad - it is demonic.

Paul will mention three of the reasons this kind of thinking and living is so bad in the following verses:

- 1) It destroys love
- 2) It destroys Gospel culture
- 3) It keeps Christ from being formed in us

1) Legalism Destroys Love:

Galatians 4:12 Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. 13 You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, 14 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. 15 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. 16 Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?

Paul here goes back and remembers when he first came to them preaching. Apparently he had some bodily ailment when he came to them. Some have guessed that he maybe had malaria, which would have been debilitating and could have affected his eyes. We’re not sure. But we know that when he got to Galatia, he was sick, so sick that his condition was a trial to them (verse 14.)

On top of this sickness, ancient sources seem to indicate he wasn't a good looking guy. One author compiled ancient sources about Paul and wrote,

“He was ugly, short, stout, plump, of small head, bald, pale, his face covered with a thick beard, an eagle nose, piercing eyes, dark eyebrows. His speech, embarrassed [and] faulty, gave a poor idea of his eloquence.”² (I always picture George Costanza.)

So he isn't the guy people are drawn to, and on top of that he is so sick that he is a burden to them. So you might expect them to reject him. You want a leader who is good looking, an eloquent speaker, magnetic (you obviously don't care about those things, but people usually do.) But he came with one thing: the good news of the Gospel of Jesus.

And because of that, because he was bringing Jesus to them, they received him not like a short sickly plump rando, but as an angel of God, as they would receive Christ Himself. Anything he needed was provided, and if gouging out their eyes would have helped his eyes, they would have done it (verse 15). They so loved Christ that they loved the one who taught them about Him. There was a relationship of mutual love and honor between the shepherd and his flock in Galatia, there was an eagerness to help.

But then the Judaizers came in and said, “There's something more. If you want to really be complete, if you want to be elite, if you want to be better, follow these laws.” Paul didn't tell them that, so Paul wasn't such a faithful teacher after all, they thought. And now, without having changed at all, Paul became the enemy (verse 16).

Ray Ortlund writes, *“There are two religions constantly competing for the soul of every church: the wondrous cross of divine sacrifice, and the hideous cross of human sacrifice. If we are not settled and subdued and healed by the wondrous cross of Jesus, where he offered himself as our scapegoat for our real moral guilt before God, then we will go looking for a human victim as the scapegoat for our own guilty anxiety. We will sacrifice someone on a cross of our own grotesque invention.”*

One thing that happens in the religious heart is that we can start to see ourselves as the good guys and those other people as the bad guys. When we forget that Jesus came to our sin and guilt and shame, we can convince ourselves that our biggest problem is

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https://biblehub.com/library/schaff/history_of_the_christian_church_volume_i/section_30_paul_before_his.htm

those other people out there (because I'm good on my own and they must be polluting or corrupting me), so we look to make enemies.

Solzhenitsyn's warned that "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

When we believe the Gospel, we know that I am evil and in need of the redemption of Jesus. If I think I'm pretty good on my own, then I need to go on the hunt for the bad people so I can win.

And so as they've turned from the cross as ultimate, the love they once had for the one who came to them on fumes, sick, worn out, half-blind, and half-dead - the love that would have gouged its eyes out for the sickly ugly teacher of the most beautiful truth, turned into enmity.

The surest way to erode the love among us, in your home, among the Christians you share life with, is to move on from the Gospel to some other source of your justification. Legalism destroys love.

And, in a related point, legalism destroys the culture that is created by the Gospel:

Galatians 4: 17 They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. 18 It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you,

So these false teachers were flattering the ones who were doing the extra stuff, they were excluding the ones who didn't do the extra stuff, where there was once love and unity there was now division, cool kids tables, exclusion of legitimately faithful Christians, posturing based on works. It corrupted the whole thing.

What was once a culture of love and unity and mutual sacrifice got corrupted into a community of competition, strutting, boasting, gossiping, flattering, manipulating, and celebrity seeking. All the worst things that churches in our day turn into - those were the things the Galatian church had turned in to.

I'm going to be drawing in this next section from an article by Ray Ortlund called "How to Build a Gospel Culture in Your Church." There's a link in the footnote of the sermon manuscript online.³

I think there's a real risk for any church, and a real risk for us.

Our pastors spend some time during most years contending for the Gospel - against people who would come and bring a false version of it. This seemed to happen more in the early years of our church, but we still run into it, where people want to change the message of the cross, change key doctrines about salvation and who Jesus is, and more often, change the emphasis of our church away from it. And so we meet with people often to lay out why these things are important, why we believe them, and why the doctrinal nonsense can't fly here.

And, hearing from many of you, that is something many of you have appreciated, or appreciated the fruit of. You're glad for a rigorous emphasis on bible teaching, which is a rigorous emphasis on the Gospel.

But here's a real danger, and something we all need to help with:

Ortlund writes, "faithfulness to the gospel requires more than doctrinal purity in our church[.]. It also requires relational beauty in our church[.] But it is possible sincerely to preach true doctrine while, at the same time, utterly deny that doctrine by an ugly anti-gospel culture."

To unpack that a bit, believing the message of Jesus changes you, and when we all believe it, it changes us and changes our relationships with one another. It changes the vibe, the culture, the MO of the church.

So take this great statement of the Gospel from Ephesians 2:

Ephesians 2:1-10 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body[a] and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.[b] 4 But[c] God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were

³ <https://media.thegospelcoalition.org/static-blogs/ray-ortlund/files/2017/07/GDGC2.pdf>

dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

So this says that we were by nature children of wrath, enslaved to our lusts, followers of the devil, but, not because of our works but because of his mercy, God saved us - not by giving us steps to follow and works to do, but by sending his son to die and then make us alive.

And if we believe this, together, it will create a church culture of:

Humility

Grace - where people who have sinned and repented are welcomed

Peace - because we have been given peace with God

Hope - because if this is true for us, it can be true for anybody. Nobody is irredeemable.

Patience - because look how patient the Lord has been with us.

Honesty..

Listen to how 1 John 1 says it:

1 John 1:5-10 5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. 6 If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

John talks here like if we aren't honest, we aren't Christians!

Pretending, hypocrisy, and image-management isn't just a weakness, it's a heresy.

And if honesty, confession, humility, acceptance of sinful repenting people because of Christ is the vibe here, this becomes a welcoming place for repenting sinners. We aren't after only doctrinal purity, which we are desperately after. We are also after belief in that doctrine, en masse, which creates relational beauty. What Ortlund calls "A shared experience of grace for the undeserving."

I don't know where this originated, this little Gospel welcome is on the website of dozens of churches. And let this be true of us - here this welcome to Jesus, extended to you, when the struggle has been long and fierce, when you feel your need, when you know you have sinned and need a savior. It says:

*To all who are weary and need rest,
To all who mourn and long for comfort,
To all who feel worthless and wonder if God cares,
To all who fail and desire strength,
To all who sin and need a Savior,
This church opens wide her doors with a welcome from Jesus Christ, the
Ally of his enemies, the Defender of the guilty, the Justifier of the
inexcusable, the Friend of sinners. Welcome!*

And again, not caring about this, or losing this, is the big risk we face - this is how we will lose the Gospel here if we lose it. We're pretty alert to false gospels and false teaching, but we have to be equally alert to the things that interrupt Gospel culture and create an ugly vibe among us. Things like:

Scrutinizing one another and fault-finding

Grumbling and complaining

Guarded aloofness

Gossip

Arrogance

Pretending and image management

Pretending we are OK on our own

Earning acceptance with manipulation rather than truth-telling

Litmus tests for one another - over things like politics, masks, authors we've read - looking for ways to divide.

Feelings of inferiority

Engaging in what psychoanalysis call the "narcissism of small differences," where the more a community shares common beliefs, the more likely they are to get into feuds with one another and ridicule one another and become hypersensitive to super small differences in each other.

Accepting the notion that certain people can't be redeemed or restored

Believing people can't change

Failure to have hope for one another, failure to forgive one another, failure to have a generous tone of delight in one another, as expressed by David in Psalm 16:3

**Psalm 16:3 "As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones,
in whom is all my delight."**

If we begin to believe that I have something to boast about: my superior knowledge, my superior thinking, my superior education, my superior diligence and commitment to the spiritual disciplines - whatever it is the heart uses to boast over others - we will begin to lose Gospel culture.

So legalism destroys love, it destroys gospel culture, and it keeps Christ from being formed in us:

Galatians 4:19 my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! 20 I wish I could be present with you now and change my

tone, for I am perplexed about you.

So Paul says that he is in anguish over the Galatians, and he compares it to the anguish of childbirth. (Of course, he's a guy...)

But it's like a long labor here - when will this baby arrive? When will Christ be formed in you?

When we believe in Christ, and trust in Christ alone for our righteousness, our forgiveness, our acceptance before God, a process of change begins.

And as we keep looking to Christ, we become more like Him. Christ is formed in us:

We are transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2)

The life of Jesus is displayed in us (2 Corinthians 4:10)

Christ works through us (Romans 15:18)⁴

The Spirit of God works among us and bears fruit in us (Galatians 5:22)

When we are drinking deeply of the grace of Christ in the Gospel, we become like Christ, and the ethos of our church community becomes like Christ.

When we are obsessed with our special knowledge, special observances, the things we do to make us better, it all dissolves.

So we must choose - will we be all about Christ, depend on Christ, rejoice in Christ, forgive as Christ forgives, act like we need Christ, or will we turn again to religious self-sufficiency, self-righteousness, self-aggrandizement, and once again go back to the demonic way of living we left before.

Let's pray and confess our sins in quiet.

Prayer of Confession

⁴ These three passages were used in this sequence by John Piper in his sermon on this text here: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/o-that-christ-would-be-formed-in-you>

Father, we thank you for the Gospel of Jesus. Thank you for sending your son to endure the cross so that sinners like us could be reckoned. Thank you for all the beauty of life and beauty of community that belief in that gospel creates.

But we confess that so often we trade the glorious robes of Christ's righteousness that you've given us for the fig-leaves of our own self-righteousness. We become self-justifying, posturing, pretending, loveless, and graceless people when we take our eyes off of our need for your grace and your provision of grace. Forgive our legalistic hearts.

Jesus, thank you that you came to set us free - free from our sin, and free from having to treat the laws demands like they are the way we get to you. Thank you for your grace in giving your life for us, of taking our sin and hypocrisy and self-righteousness on yourself and putting it to death on the cross. Forgive us for treating that like it's a small thing.

And Spirit, we want you to move among us. We want you to make this a place where we move toward each other with rejoicing and hope, where those who don't know you sense your love and your welcome, where every reality of our church is defined by the gospel and sweetened by the gospel.⁵ So help our unbelief, that we might take the Gospel into every corner our our hearts and have it affect every aspect of our lives. And we pray these things in Jesus' name.

Assurance

Romans 5:1 "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Questions for Discussion With Small Groups:

- 1) Discuss the idea of Gospel culture and the specific ways mutual faith in the Gospel will shape our relationships.
- 2) How are you vigilant against doctrinal threats to the purity of the Gospel?

⁵ <https://media.thegospelcoalition.org/static-blogs/ray-ortlund/files/2017/07/GDGC2.pdf>

- 3) How are you vigilant against threats to the relational beauty created by the Gospel among us?
- 4) Are you quicker to accept false beliefs or the sins that ruin community?
- 5) In this context, what is preventing Christ from being formed among the Galatians?
What do you think that means?