

MBC – 7/3/2022 – Pastor Doug Thompson  
 PAUL’S EPISTLE TO THE GALATIANS – GOSPEL FREEDOM  
**“Until Christ is Formed in You”**  
 Galatians 4:12-20

We’re back in our study of Galatians. Turn with me to ch.4. And for just a few verses here, Paul lays aside his heavy theological arguments to get very personal, even emotional with his brothers and sisters in Galatia. This passage has much to say to us about the kind of relationship a shepherd should have with his sheep. Let’s read it together—

- Galatians 4:12–20 <sup>12</sup>Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. <sup>13</sup>You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? <sup>17</sup>They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. <sup>18</sup>It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, <sup>19</sup>my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! <sup>20</sup>I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

### **I. Paul the shepherd.**

Paul loves these people. They are his spiritual children – he ‘birthed’ them through the Gospel. That was a painful, agonizing process – you can read about it in Acts 13-14. And now he is having contractions again – until the life of Christ is fully formed in them.

Up to this point in his letter, Paul has been like a fiery Jewish lawyer arguing his case against the Judaizers, going deep into OT Scripture and history to prove that his Gospel is the true Gospel. And in the process he’s been really rough on the Galatians: He is astonished that they could leave Christ and the Gospel of grace for this false message of salvation through self-effort. In ch.3 he calls them “O foolish Galatians!” He wonders if he has wasted his time on some of them.

- And there is a place for speaking hard truths to the flock. Paul told Timothy, “Reprove, rebuke, exhort.” Call sin, sin, and call false teachers what they are. Tell the truth. Anything less is unloving – and after being a shepherd for 38 years I can tell you that Jesus’ sheep can handle the truth when they hear it. It’s the wolves that howl. . .

\*Didn’t we hear wolves howling after the Supreme Court decision last Thursday? I mean false Christians who *mourned* that Roe vs. Wade was finally shut down.

I know a pastor who was celebrating this victory from God from the pulpit last Sunday and the daughter of another pastor in the church got up and walked out – she was so offended. But beloved, the issue of abortion divides the sheep from the goats, just as the issue of homosexuality and transgenderism divides true Christians from counterfeits – and the true shepherd must make these divisions clear.

- Paul always did this: in ch.1, he says, if anyone, even an angel from heaven messes with the one true Gospel, let him (or her) be accursed – sent to hell.

But here in v.12, Paul's whole tone changes. Maybe the Holy Spirit nudged him and reminded him: "Paul when you talk like this you also need to reaffirm your love for these people." So he calls them "brothers," *adelphoi* = brothers and sisters – he wasn't just talking to the men. And in v.19, he calls them "my little children" – John uses this phrase often, but this is the only place Paul called Christians "my little children."

I think people misunderstand Paul: He loved people. He was all about personal relationships. He was rarely alone – even when he was in jail. In Acts, when he travelled, he always had companions. And wherever he arrived he immediately sought out other believers.

In his letters he mentions dozens of people by name, and prayed constantly for them. He even prayed for people he had never met but only heard about from others. He was not some sort of aloof introvert. He was goal-oriented person, but his goals all involved people and being with people. Sometimes in his letters he's so into his doctrine and theology that he doesn't express it, but the love is always there. We heard this earlier—

- 1 Thessalonians 2:7–8 <sup>7</sup>But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. <sup>8</sup>So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.
- 1 Thessalonians 2:11–12 <sup>11</sup>For you know how, like a father with his children, <sup>12</sup>we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Paul saw his ministry like spiritual parenting – from giving new birth through the Gospel, to seeing Christ fully formed in his children! And to me, the most touching personal story about Paul is when he met with the elders of the church in Ephesus one last time—

- Acts 20:36–38 <sup>36</sup>And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. <sup>37</sup>And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, <sup>38</sup>being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again.

Paul was a tender, loving shepherd and he was deeply loved in return. So beginning in v.12, he's not Paul the debater – he's Paul, their spiritual father and friend who appeals to them out of love.

## II. Paul the example.

- Galatians 4:12 <sup>12</sup>Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are.

What does he mean that he "became as they are?" He means that he entered their world, their lives and their culture, even though it wasn't his. Paul was a Jew. His lifestyle was Jewish, and they were mostly Gentile. But Paul would get out of his own comfort zone and do whatever it took to cross these barriers and proclaim the Gospel. He explained this in—

- 1 Corinthians 9:21 <sup>21</sup>To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.

\*And they could see his love for them by the sacrifices he was willing to make for them. It wasn't just talk—

- We can think about our own Ashlee Trenery over in Cameroon, becoming like the Baka people in how they live, what they eat – to win them to Christ. Recently she had to use all of her EMT skills to become the town doctor, while their doctor was away. Now if they wonder if she is really serious about this Jesus and the Bible she is working on for them, she can say: *"I have become as you are!"*

And this was Paul's credibility for his appeal: *"I have become as you are – now you, become as I am!"*

He means, "Become free in Christ, like me! Free from the man-made rules of those who would add to the Gospel. You've seen my life, you've seen how Christ has changed me, not by works of the law, but by hearing with faith. I want you to be able to say what I can say: 'It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me, and the life which I now live I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and delivered Himself up for me.'"

*"You know that I really live like that, and I appeal to you: become like me."*

\*How many of us could say that? "You can trace your life and your faith around mine." Wow. That is really astounding—but by God's grace, Paul had the character and integrity to be able to say that and not be guilty of pride. He was speaking the truth – In 1Cor11:1 he said, *"Be imitators (the word means 'mimics') of me, as I am of Christ."* His life was so conformed to Christ that he could tell others to follow him, and they would be like Christ too – *amazing!*

And this was foundational to Paul's ministry method: he was a mighty preacher and teacher, but he didn't just give people words, he gave them a flesh and blood *pattern*, an example they could follow—

- Philippians 4:9 <sup>9</sup>What you have learned and received and heard and *seen in me*—practice these things.

He communicated the Gospel with his lips and also with his life! They didn't just hear *how* to get saved, they saw how a saved man lives. He praised the Thessalonians because they imitated him—

- 1 Thessalonians 1:6 <sup>6</sup>And you became imitators of us and of the Lord – (the implication is that if you imitated Paul, you imitated Christ).

He told the Philippians, while he was in jail—

- Philippians 3:17 <sup>17</sup>Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.

I.e, "While I'm in the slammer, look for *other* Christlike examples to follow!" Search out those men and women who live like Jesus, and follow their example. That is some of the best advice I could give to any Christian: find the *right* spiritual heroes – that's the important part! – and follow their example.

- My wife has always steered women to her spiritual example, Elizabeth Elliot, who always steered women to her spiritual example, Amy Carmichael, whose spiritual example was a

woman named Lilius Trotter. And just this week a younger woman told Janice that she was greatly helped and blessed by listening to an old message by Elizabeth Elliot.

- \*When we hire people around here at the church and school, one of the questions I always want to ask is, “Who are your spiritual heroes – living and dead?” – and oftentimes, the deader, the better. Who you follow is who you will become – so make sure you follow those who follow Christ!

*Q: Let me ask you: Who are your spiritual examples? – people you can trace your life around?*

There are two principles here: We are to *follow* Christlike examples, and then we are to strive to be a Christlike example to others – every Christian should strive to be one that others can trace their lives around, no exceptions. Even if you have some growing to do, you should seek to reproduce in others what Christ has done in you. When Paul left young Timothy in Ephesus, he wrote this—

- 1 Timothy 4:12 <sup>12</sup>Let no one despise you for your youth, but *set the believers an example in speech*, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.

I can relate to Timothy. I started pastoring when I was 29. I didn’t have the maturity or life experience to lead a church. I longed for grey hair – when I finally got it, it fell out! I couldn’t suddenly become old and experienced – but by God’s grace I could seek to set an example for my flock, “*in speech*, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.”

This church is going to be looking for another shepherd, and you need more than a shepherd whose *teaching* you can follow – you need a shepherd whose *life* you can follow!—

- Hebrews 13:7 <sup>7</sup>Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

You look for a man who can say with Paul—

- 1 Cor 11:1 Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

And next, he reminds them of their relationship when he came to them with the Gospel—

### **III. The Galatians heart toward Paul.**

Pick it up at the end of v.12—

- Galatians 4:12–16 . . . You did me no wrong. (Paul had no complaints about how they had treated him.) <sup>13</sup>You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first.

We have no idea what Paul is referring to here – Luke doesn’t help us in Acts, but apparently Paul had some chronic condition that flared up when he arrived in Galatia, and it kept him there. It might have the “thorn in the flesh” that he talks about in 2 Cor.12 – the affliction that he prayed 3 times would leave him, but God said no.

Some scholars think that Paul picked up malaria – or that he had some eye problem because of what he says in v.15. But whatever it was, he says in v.14 that *“his condition was a trial to them.”* It was a burden to them. They had to care for Paul, try to nurse him back to health. Some think that he had some gross symptoms that could have turned them off.

\*And remember that in that day, people often associated illness with divine judgment, and here comes Paul, and he has this disgusting disease – does God have something against him? And let me add this: In a second century writing entitled *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, this is how Paul is described: “a man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs . . . with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked.” So they weren’t drawn to Paul by anything about his personality or appearance, but the Gospel he proclaimed to them was beautiful and had brought them new life. So look how they treated him—

- <sup>14</sup>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.

At the end of Acts 13, we read this reaction when Paul and Barnabas were in Galatia—

- Acts 13:44–48, 52 <sup>44</sup>The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. <sup>45</sup>But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. <sup>46</sup>And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. <sup>47</sup>For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.” <sup>48</sup>And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. . . . <sup>52</sup>And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

These Gentiles were overjoyed: God had made a way for them to be saved, through Jesus! God had opened their eyes to see that Paul was a man of God with a message from God. This is why they cared for him, loved him, and treated him “as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself!” Didn’t Jesus tell His Disciples, “The one who receives you receives Me?”

So why is he bringing this up? Because he wants to remind them of how powerful and beautiful the Gospel was to them at the beginning – how much joy it brought them. They loved the message and they loved the messenger – he asks them—

- <sup>15</sup>What then has become of your blessedness? (“You were so happy back then – and you were full of the Spirit and full of Christ. . . so what happened?”) For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. (So what did happen? What changed their attitude toward them? Well, he tells us - )<sup>16</sup>*Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? Ah!*

It was the Judaizers who deceived the Galatians and changed their minds. Paul was their enemy, Paul was the deceiver – they said – because he preached salvation by faith alone, He was the one cheating the people out of greater blessings. And the people fell for it. Because, we say it over and over: *legalism is intimidating*. Rather than look unspiritual, so many Christians will give up their freedom for bondage, and submit to man-made rules.

- We've had people leave MBC to join the Seventh-Day Adventists. Why? Because they were drawn to the security of rules: only worship on Saturday, don't eat these foods, tithe 10%. Very similar to the Galatians. But Paul wouldn't back down. He loved them too much to be intimidated, so he called out these false teachers, and he rebuked the Galatians for listening to them. He told the truth, and it cost him his relationship with some of them, and that hurt him deeply—

\* This wasn't just some doctrinal dispute for Paul – it was personal – it hurt him that false doctrine had affected his relationships with people he cared about deeply.

\*Over the years we've had people leave MBC because they didn't like what we taught – and it hurts. They have left over speaking in tongues, or election; one family left our church and wrote me a nasty letter saying I had no right to criticize Joel Osteen or Roman Catholicism. Another woman told others that she *hated* my preaching – because I preached the doctrines of grace. And I would say with Paul, *"Have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?"* You can dislike my delivery, or my questionable sense of humor – but if I am proclaiming God's Word, to you, don't reject it.

- Remember what James told us, when we hear God's Word: "Be quick to listen, but slow to speak, and slow to anger. And beloved if you find your temperature starting to rise during a sermon, ask yourself, "Even though I don't like what I'm hearing, or who is saying it – is it true?"

In v.17, Paul contrasts himself with the false teachers who had turned the Galatians against him—

#### **IV. The contrast with the false teachers.**

- Galatians 4:17 <sup>17</sup>They make much of you, but for no good purpose.

They flatter you. They go after you, they puff you up and tickle your ears, but what is their real motivation? *"They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them."* Now get this: they literally would rob these Galatians of the Gospel, to make them *their* disciples. False teachers love to boast about their followers, don't they. They always want more notches in their belts. So this is about pride, ego, and, of course, money. False teachers are always about the money – just watch Christian TV.

And Paul's a bit sarcastic here when he says in v.18 "Yeah, everyone likes to be made much of – but you need to ask yourselves why they are making much of you. I was seeking your salvation, they were seeking your money. And I still seek your good even when I'm not with you."

And then we come to the heart of this whole passage, and the key to Paul's life and ministry—

#### **V. The goal of Paul's life and ministry.**

- Galatians 4:19 . . . <sup>19</sup>my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth *until Christ is formed in you!*

Paul was in a constant, passionate, anguish until Christ was fully formed in them. It was like the pains of childbirth: He felt the contractions when he was preaching and praying for their new birth. And he was again, in real mental and physical agony because others were interfering with the process—

- Every mom here can imagine the horror of being pregnant, going to the doctor and hearing the doc say that the baby has stopped growing! And that was the effect these false teachers had on their spiritual growth.

So what does it mean “*until Christ is formed in you?*”

It simply means becoming more and more like Jesus: in the way He lived and loved and served and spoke—remember Paul said in Gal2:20: “*It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. . .*” It was hard to tell where Paul left off and Jesus began. Someone I read said it should be like the life of Jesus has been reincarnated in us – wow. “Until Christ is formed in you” —

- Ephesians 4:13 . . . We are to reach “*the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,*” v.15 “ . . . *we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ.*”

“Oh to be like Thee!” The goal is to be completely identified with Jesus Christ—

- In Gal.3.27, Paul said we have been baptized in Christ - immersed, soaking wet with Jesus. He said we have put on Christ the way you put on your clothes. In 2 Cor.2:14, Paul said that we are “*the aroma of Christ.*” We act like Him, talk like Him, respond to situations like Him – we even smell like Him!

“Until Christ is formed in you” – is another way of saying, “until you are conformed to Christ.” Beloved, that is the Christian life. It’s *Jesus*. And I had been a Christian for many years before I really got that. There was so much other good stuff: Christian friends, worship and Christian music, telling others about Jesus—

- For a long time I thought the Christian life was knowing the Bible – but the Bible is not the end, the Bible is the means to the end, which is knowing, believing, and becoming like – **Jesus**. Didn’t Jesus say in Jn.17:6, “*And this is eternal life, that they might know the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent!*”

God’s *purpose for your life as His child* is that Jesus Christ be formed in you. Turn with me to—

- Romans 8:28 <sup>28</sup>And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Isn’t this one of the most important verses in your Bible? You have God’s promise that everything that He allows in your life, whether pain or pleasure, is meant to work for your good, and to work toward His *purpose* for you – and we don’t have to wonder what His *purpose* is—

- Romans 8:29 <sup>29</sup>For those whom he foreknew he also predestined *to be conformed to the image of his Son.*

That’s His purpose for you. God saved you to make you more like His Son. And every situation He brings into your life – is to make you more like His Son. To conform you to His image.

- I was doing my daily walk and talking to Janice on Friday, when out of nowhere, my foot must have caught on something, and I went sprawling on the asphalt – tore my jeans, my knee and

thumb – there was blood all over my cellphone – which went flying – and I heard my wife saying, “Doug? Doug? Honey, are you there? Hello?”

So what’s the point of the story? Well, that I am very clumsy. But the point is that even this happened to make me more like Jesus. I can know that because my heavenly Father works *everything* toward His purpose of *forming His Son in me*.

- As I limped back to the church, I was praying, “Uh. Lord. You have my attention. Anything specific you want me to get here?” And a voice from heaven said, “How about watch where you are walking?” So I went back and wrote that in my Bible . . .

Beloved, your life will never be the same if you remember that God’s purpose for you, in every joy or trial, is to conform you to the image of His Son.

\*I hope that through our study of Galatians you have seen that the Gospel in a word is “Christ.” We are *justified* when we put our trust wholly in Jesus Christ, and what He accomplished through His obedient life, and substitutionary death on the cross – not anything in ourselves, not in our efforts to do good, read our Bibles or go to church. Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

- **Justification** in a word is “Christ,” But **sanctification** in a word is also, “Christ.” You look at Christ, you trust in Christ, you worship Christ, and you trace your life around Christ – and the goal is – to become more like Christ.
- And **glorification** in a word is also “Christ,” isn’t it? Because when God raptures you or raises you from the dead, you get a body like His and you will be like Him when you see Him as He is.

Let me take you to two passages where Paul talks about this process of Christ being conformed to the image of Christ—

- 2 Corinthians 3:18 (NASB) <sup>18</sup>But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

The Gk. word for “transformed” is literally, “metamorphosis.” As we stare into the mirror of God’s Word, we see the glory of Christ, revealed on every page. And the more we stare, and the more we obey, the more we share in that same glory. We are “transformed – changed by degrees – into the same image from glory to glory.”

And he says it again in—

- Romans 12:2 <sup>2</sup>Do not be conformed to this world, (*don’t* take the form and shape of the world), but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. Stop there.

Notice carefully what v.2 says--this is how transformation happens:

1.) The first command is negative—*do not be conformed* to this world. So there is something we need to resist. We need to fight against being shaped and molded by the world! That is the enemy of our sanctification. Don’t take on the shape of this world! Fight against that.



2.) The second command is positive—*be transformed*. But this verb is in the passive voice—“be transformed.” It’s not a command to do it, but to allow this to be done to you! I.e., You can’t transform yourself, but you are commanded to allow God to transform you!

3.) How do we do that? “transformed--*by the renewing of your minds.*”

Transformation is God’s part. What is our part? Renewing our minds through hearing, reading and meditating on the Word of God. Beloved, are you doing that? Are you staring in the pages of this Book – daily – to be filled and fed. This is how God transforms you. And it’s how you resist being conformed to the world. Resist and renew. You do your part, and God will do His and conform you to the image of His Son.

\*So let me ask you: “Is Christ being formed in you?”

- If you imagined your life right now as a big barrel – what is filling that barrel? You’ve got work, you’ve got play, you’ve got family and friends and keeping up on the news – and the cares of everyday life (I spent most of yesterday, trying to fix our broken dryer). You’ve got good stuff in the barrel, and maybe some bad stuff – but how much room is left for Christ?

How can Christ be formed in you if you leave no room for Him? If you let everything else come before Him? Paul prayed that “Christ would dwell in our hearts through faith” – are you giving Him that place and that space, in your heart, in your time, in your life? Last we sang a song that said this—

O great God of highest heaven, Occupy my lowly heart  
Own it all and reign supreme, Conquer every rebel power  
Let no vice or sin remain, That resists Your holy war  
You have loved and purchased me, Make me Yours forevermore

\*God’s entire purpose for you until He takes you home is that Christ would be formed in you – will you make His purpose, your purpose – until He takes you home?

### **What to look for in a new pastor—**

- 1.) Look for a shepherd who speaks the truth – even when its hard – in love.
- 2.) Look for a shepherd who isn’t afraid to express his love for the sheep.
- 3.) Look for a shepherd who can lead by his own personal example.
- 4.) Look for a shepherd who is becoming more and more like Jesus.

You should see in his life what J.B. said: “He must increase. I must decrease.”

- 5.) Look for a shepherd whose ministry, in his life and his teaching, is consumed with seeing the people become more and more like Jesus.

\* \* \*

I've asked you to pray for my pastor friend Lloyd Johnson back in St. Paul, Minnesota. I married Lloyd and his wife Ronna over 40 years ago, and Lloyd has pastored his church just about as long as I've been at MBC. Lloyd has been fighting off cancer for several year, but just a couple weeks ago he finally said no more to any treatments. He is waiting for the Lord to take him home. Lloyd is the kind of shepherd I described, and you hear it in a letter he wrote to one of his young granddaughters this last week—

My dear Lila,

I remember your spunk and your inquisitive nature – and I loved it. As you inquire through life, seek Christ first and follow in your Grandfather's pursuits, who preached Christ and Him crucified. Life is about loving people. I encourage you to love God with all your heart and then love people; the greatest commandments. I will miss seeing you grow up and enjoying life with you. But the sovereign God has not ordained it so. Dear Lila, learn what it means to be born again and I will see you again. With all my love, grandpa.

Christ be with me, Christ within me,  
Christ behind me and before me.  
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,  
Christ to comfort and restore.  
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ in hearts of all who know me.  
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger,  
Christ in quiet and in roar.