



Galatians 4:8-20
Where Do We Go From Here?

Summary: In light of their mutual history and affection Paul compels the Galatians to persist in Christ and not go back to dry religion.

Last week was Christmas. I hope you were able to make the most of it. I know it probably required some modifications, I'm sure there were some disappointments, but I hope it brought you joy. I hope you were able to see family and friends, whether up close or at a distance, whether in person or on a screen.

I hope you were able to give, or get, some cool stuff. In our house it was PC components, musical instruments, and books this year.

I hope your hearts are full and I hope you'll enjoy the slow pace of the coming week as well.

But I know something sad. And so do many of you. The fullness and joy you feel right now will fade. The fact is, every year, even under the best of circumstances, there's a tendency for your life after Christmas to slowly start to look and feel like your life before Christmas. The poinsettias die. The tree comes down, the gifts that you were so excited become normal and ordinary. The magic only lasts for so long, and then what?

Will you look forward to something else you need or want, or will you rest in something you already have, something you already are?

This is where things tie right into our study in the book of Galatians, because, you remember Paul is talking *to Christians*, reminding them of all they have in Christ. He's telling them: you don't need to go looking anywhere else, or put your hope in anything else, you already have the riches of God, in Christ, so cling to Him, rest in Him, trust in Him.

But he's telling them all of this *because* they were being tempted to wander away from God, to find their joy, confidence, and direction in something else. Their life after Christ was starting to look like their life before Christ. We'll talk about that this morning, as well why and how people drift in the Christian life, and what can do about in our lives and the lives of those we love. Read with me as Paul compares their life now with their life back then. He says,

Galatians 4:8 But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods.

Now that makes sense, right? We can understand how you could live that way *before* Christ, the question is what about *after* you're saved?

9 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? 10 You observe days and months and seasons and years. 11 I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain.

I want you to notice the boomerang shaped life Paul is describing here, he says your life after Christ is in danger of becoming a lot like your life without Christ.

He's writing to people who were not Jewish, people who grew up learning about Greek and Roman gods and serving them. When you needed crops to grow, you prayed or sacrificed to the god of agriculture. When you wanted to have children you prayed and sacrificed to the god of fertility. When you went to battle you completed rituals for the god of war.

You didn't have a relationship with these gods, you just had rules and rituals. And if you followed them, you could hope things would go well. If you didn't, then you risked the wrath of the gods, and it was all your fault. It was a religion of rules, rituals, and formulas, and it is the religion we're all most likely to follow today.

Even those who are very secular, those who don't claim any particular religion, still have a certain morality, a certain code, a certain conviction that there are things that should be done and things that should not be done. And they try to live what they have determined to be an ethical life by doing certain things and avoiding others, by following their own personally curated list of rules.

And then there are those who are very devout. No matter which religion they follow, they have a formula too. They say you're supposed to pray this often, about these things, and in this way. You're supposed to celebrate this feast or observe that fast; you should make this trip, or do these things. There are rules, there are rituals – there may be a lot of them or a few of them but you're better if you follow them and you're worse if you don't.

So, for the both the secular human and the deeply religious, life is more about rules, rhythms, and rituals than it is about relationships.

And Paul is writing to Christians, warning them, that even though they know Christ, they're becoming more like this again. They had a relationship with God, something vibrant and alive, something real and refreshing, but they were reducing it down to a set of rules and rituals, a religious formula.

And friends, the same thing can happen with us – our life with Christ can begin to look like our life before Christ, so you go back to having a list of things you do and don't do, a set of rituals and habits with occasional sacrifices and you begin to trust in those things instead developing a durable and dynamic relationship with God.

You want to see what this looks like? Let's run a little test and I'll show you one way we do it. You're here this morning, or you're listening or watching – why?

Is it so you can stand before God and say, I went to church? Are you here to make God happy, or to keep Him from being upset? Is this an obligation to you?

Are you trying to trade your attendance at church, or listening to this sermon, for something with God? Are you trying to negotiate: "If I get up and go, or if I go ahead and listen, it will make God happy with me even though I did that thing last night or last week?" Are you hoping that being here or listening or watching puts you back in God's favor?

Or, are you trying to *stay* in God's favor? Are you here so that God will bless you? Are you here with the family so that your kids will turn out alright? Are you trying to trade your attendance or attention with God in order to get something you want? If so, you're trusting in rules, sacrifices, and rituals instead of relationships. And it is so easy to do.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, beware the temptation to drift back to a life based on rules, rituals, and sacrifices when you've already been given a relationship with Christ. You'll be in bondage to the weak and beggarly elements instead of walking in the power of the Spirit and the riches of Christ.

Church, we must admit and recognize that this is a very real threat, a very real danger, for you, your spouse, your children, your friends. It is very, very, possible for someone who knows Christ, who is sealed with the Spirit, who has seen and experienced miracles, who has worshipped and praised the living God, who has heard the gospel preached clearly and well and often, to drift away from Christ. It is possible for you and me to [leave our first love](#) as Jesus said of the church of Ephesus.

How? How does it happen? What leads us to drift? One of the greatest factors is listening to other voices. The churches in Galatia listened to people who said following Jesus should lead you all the way back to following Moses and listening to them was turning the churches away from Christ.

The same thing happened in the garden. Adam and Eve knew what God had said, they knew the direction He had given, they had relationship with Him, but the serpent came along, said something else, and they listened, and began to wander.

Judas spent three years up close and personal with Jesus, ate with him, traveled with Him, listened to Him teach sermon after sermon, had private, personal conversations with Him, watched Him work miracles and worked miracles himself through the power and grace of God, and yet, he drifted back to own ideas, he drifted back to his own goals and ambitions before he met Jesus, he listened to other voices.

This phenomenon is all over Scripture, in the Old Testament and the New and it's prophesied to continue in the future: *people who once knew God* slowly wandered away from Him and listened to other voices, they drifted away from relationship and toward their own choice of rules, rituals, and sacrifices.

There are always voices calling us out of relationship with God and into rules, rituals, and formulas. They tell us we can and should make our own list of what we can and can't do, what's really bad and what's kind of OK or understandable, and what steps we need to take to make sure we're good with 'the man upstairs' instead of spending time in direct, personal, relationship with Him.

But when we trade our relationship for rules we trade liberty for bondage, power for weakness, and wealth for poverty.

Jesus prayed to the Father for the disciples and said:

John 17:3 this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

God wants to have a relationship with us! He wants us to know Him, and to be known by Him.

And, our relationship with God was always meant to affect our relationship with others. Remember the Great Commandment, to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength – to be fully engaged in a relationship with Him, and then, to love our neighbor as ourselves. First God, then others. Our relationships with other people are supposed to be reflections of our relationship with Him.

So Paul reminds the Galatians of the relationship they used to have with each other. He says, there was a time when you guys were willing to do anything for me because I needed help. Well, now I'm willing to say something to you because I see *you* need help. He says:

12 Brethren, I urge you to become like me, for I *became* like you. You have not injured me at all. **13** You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. **14** 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. **15** 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.

Paul likely had some sort of eye infection when he first stopped in Galatia. Toward the end of this letter, in Chapter 6:11 he points out how large he is writing with own hand – proof that it's him writing. In another letter He tells the Corinthians about his "thorn in the flesh," some injury or illness that he prayed about over and over asking God to heal him, but God didn't. And then, of course, he says the Galatians would have plucked out their own eyes and given them to him at one point.

So, Paul was probably a mess to look at when he was in town. But they still treated him well, they received him as if they were receiving Jesus Himself. They had a good relationship; they were friends and friendly with each other – they should know that Paul has their best interest at heart as he says these hard things to them. He asks:

16 Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?

Paul and the Galatians once had this great relationship, this great friendship – they worshipped together, prayed together, saw miracles together, and Paul preached the gospel to them clearly, boldly, and plainly. Their lives were changed by being together, but now they're drifting apart, the Galatians are leaving the things Paul taught them about Jesus.

So, what happened? Why the drift? Other voices came along.

Galatians 4:17 They zealously court you, *but for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them.*

Paul says, they're playing hard to get, in order to catch your attention. They want to make you feel like you're missing out on something because you're not one of them.

The same thing happens today. Christian, we could make a long list of all the things and people that want your attention, all the organizations, products and companies, that want you to want them.

They zealously court you and yet they want to exclude you – because they can't feel good about having their little group or team or tribe if there aren't people on the outside who see them and envy them and want to be a part of them, but can't. They need you, but they need you on the outside, looking at them.

We do the same thing as individuals. The pretty girl or good-looking guy needs you to look at them, needs you to think they're attractive, or strong, the smart person needs you to notice how well they did, but they need you to be on the outside, always admiring, wanting, wishing you could be like them. They can't let everyone in, because that would dissolve the tension and the whole thing would fall apart.

Now contrast that with Christ, Who, for our sake, became nothing and opened His arms wide calling anyone who wished, to come.

In fact, Jesus turned His back on the rich, the famous, the powerful, the connected, the influencers, and He went after the least, the last, and the lost. He went to the blind, the injured and sick, He went to the poor, to the unpopular, to the dumb. He went to the people that had been rejected by the cool kids of society. He went to the people whose lives were a mess.

And He said, "Come to Me. Follow Me. Meet My Father. Come into His Family." He welcomed people in instead of keeping them out.

Church, I have to warn you – this is an existential threat to the health and safety of your soul living here, today, outside the nation's capitol. Because there is no end to the number of groups and individuals who want to zealously court you. They want you to listen to

them, to give your attention and affection to them, to keep your eyes on them and follow them, to become like them *so they can feel good about themselves*.

My friends, we have spoken before about the fact that we now live in an attention-based economy. The most powerful things in the world right now are algorithms that track, plot, and predict your behavior and likes. We all know we're constantly being monitored, analyzed and offered more of what they think we'll like, so we stay engaged. Your email, your search engine, social media platform, and online media from YouTube to Facebook to Discord to Tik-Tok it's all offered to you *for free*, right? Why? So they can learn your habits, likes and history and sell that information to advertisers who zealously court you, that you may be zealous for them.

Your information is packed and sold to people who want to get your attention and profit from you. They want to use your voice, your vote, and your visa card or V-bucks – they want to direct your attention and lead you in the direction of their choosing.

But let me ask: do you think they're going to lead you closer to God or farther away?

As the outsiders zealously courted the Galatians, Paul was calling them back to what they already knew and had experienced, he said:

18 But it is good to be zealous in a good thing always, and not only when I am present with you.

You know the right thing, he said, you just need to do it all the time, not just when I'm there.

19 My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you, 20 I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you.

He sounds like the exasperated parent of a trying teenager – I care about you, I'm worried about you, I'm trying to help you, but honestly, I don't know if I'm getting through.

There is this group, the Judaizers, who are zealously courting you, but why? They want you to look up to them. They want you to feel bad about who you are because you're not like them.

And then, Paul says, there's me. I'm like a mother in birth pains for you. I love you, but you're hurting me so bad. I feel pain in my body, but I would gladly give my life for you to be here and healthy.

I want us to consider this from two angles – on the one hand, put yourself in the place of the Galatians, Paul is telling them how much he loves them, the affection and affinity, the friendship and love he feels for them, and all of that is because of the affection that Christ has for them.

Every week we have been reminded of Paul's confession:

Gal 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

He knows that Christ loved Him, that **God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.**

Paul knows the love of God and that compels him to love his neighbor, in this case, the churches of Galatia.

So listen, if you are here this morning, and you are in Christ, He loves you. And there are people around you who love you like Paul loved the Galatians. God's purpose and ideal is that we would be brought closer and closer to Him and to each other. We are supposed be a family with God as our father and one another as sisters and brothers.

The gospel, and therefore the church, is supposed to be compelling, attractive, inviting. You are supposed to find a place to belong and attach here as Christ weaves you in. Others want you to feel like you're outside so that you'll want in, but the doors to the church are to be wide open saying, you belong here, in Christ, this is a home for you; a safe place for sheep.

But pivot the lens and let's look at this from Paul's perspective -even though he loved the Galatians, served the Galatians, spoke the truth to the Galatians, they still wandered away.

And so, I want to recognize that there are people in your life that you loved and served, people you prayed for and with, people who once came to worship with you, and you're worried about them now. They have been listening to other voices. They've become zealous for other things. Their life after Christ is starting to look a lot like a life before Christ.

My friends, I want to acknowledge the pain you feel. I want to acknowledge your frustration and confusion. And I want us to see it happens here in Scripture. I want you to see and feel the angst of the apostle.

19 My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you, **20** I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you.

I want to remind you that as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, presenting Himself as the Messiah, he cried out

Matt 23:37 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under *her wings*, but you were not willing!

It is good, and right for us to love people. To love our friends, our family, our children and grandchildren, but no amount of love, no amount of counsel and encouragement, no amount of rules we make can keep their hearts from wandering. Other voices will speak. The devil will ask, Has God really said? The flesh will ask, why not this way, at least this once? The world around will ask, don't you want to be like us?

And you can't stop that from happening. So what should you do for them? Three things, things you also do for yourself.

1. As much as possible, guard the gates, watch what messages are coming in, and how. Are you, and they, spending more time with the truth or things that tug us away from the truth?
2. Speak to them about God – look at the example of Paul, he's bringing things up, he's not keeping quiet. And he's being open, honest and blunt while also being evidently concerned.
3. Speak to God about them. Pray. Ask the God of the impossible to do the impossible. And remember, He loves them more than you do – they're His sheep.

But know this: there will be temptation. And some will wander. Some will wander far. And some may even be lost.

And that should break our hearts, for it breaks the heart of God – but it's not all your fault. It doesn't mean you did something wrong. It just means sin and temptation are that strong. Our hearts are really that bent and broken. It means the gospel is for people who already know Jesus as much as it is for those who don't.

We are all called into a relationship with God, based on His mercy, His love, His initiating grace. It is a miracle that *any* of us are called, that any of us are saved, that any of us are kept for eternity in Christ. But it happens.

Notice, in vs 9, Paul reminds the Galatians that they know [God, or rather, are known by Him](#). As Tim Keller notes: "The great and central basis of Christian assurance is not how much our hearts are set on God, but how unshakably His heart is set on us." This is what ultimately holds us. And it's what makes possible the story of the Prodigal Son, that even if we take our inheritance and go off and squander it on our plans and desires, there is still a loving father back home waiting for us to wake up and realize what we've done.

So our passage in Galatians this morning is a warning for us – to take sin seriously. To take grace seriously. To guard our hearts, ears, and minds. To listen to the right things, and shut out the wrong voices. To pay attention to truth.

My friends, my dear children, my beloved church – there is a tendency for our lives after Christmas to slowly look and feel like our lives before Christmas and there is a temptation for our lives after Christ to slowly look and feel like our lives without Christ. Let us be aware of the danger, let us pray for ourselves and others, and let us look for the increasing grace of God in our lives. Let us remain focused on our personal relationship with God and

beware the drift toward rules, regulations, and rituals. Let us guard the gates, let us speak to people about their relationship with God, and let us speak to God about His relationship with people.

And let me say, it is possible that you are not a Christian yet. That you are here because someone brought you, or because you wandered in.

We're happy you're here and you're welcome to come back as often as you like. But we hope, we sincerely hope, that you will hear the voice of God speaking in your life, and that you will respond. As you can tell by what you've heard this morning, we're all a mess, the question is: are we being cleaned up by Jesus or are we trying to clean up ourselves? Are we here to negotiate with God, or to completely surrender? Only complete surrender will be accepted.

If there is anything we can do to help you find answers to the questions you have about God or Scripture, please let us know – ask the person who brought you, or stop by the welcome table and ask to be put in touch with one of the pastors, we've been praying for people just like you and would love to meet you.

Let's pray.