

# “Until Christ is Formed in You”

(Galatians 4:8-20)

## Introduction

➤Pride is the number one reason why people resist the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The biblical notion that we are sinners, utterly sinful – apart from Christ there is nothing good in us (Rom.3:10-12) and nothing good that comes from us (Is.64:4) – assaults our self-esteem and offends our egos. Our sinful flesh naturally repels and rebels against such attacks, and seeks to be glorified either in selfish desires or religious deeds.

I have heard it said that a Christian boasting in his/her salvation is like a rooster taking credit for the dawn. Or, by analogy, perhaps we could say that a Christian taking any credit for his/her salvation is as ridiculous and obnoxious as the donkey Jesus rode on His triumphant entrance into Jerusalem thinking that all the praise and adoration directed at Jesus was for him.

✓Illust: I will probably never forget a conversation I had with a man many years ago. Our casual and friendly conversation took a surprising turn for the worse when our agreeable discussion about the sovereignty of God homed in on the sovereignty of God in salvation. At one point he angrily sat up, pounded his index finger on the table and adamantly (loudly) exclaimed, “I get credit for my belief!” I was stunned, and momentarily speechless (which, as you know, is a big deal for me). “Did he really just say that?” I thought to myself.

➤Scripture is adamant that salvation is, from first to last, a gift of God – so that no one can boast, brag or “get credit” for their salvation – that all glory, honor and praise for our great salvation would be directed solely upon God (cf. 1Cor.1:31; Gal.6:14). He alone is worthy of such lofty praise. In fact, Scripture is hardly silent or obscure on this topic. In fact, large sections of the book of Romans are dedicated to this very truth – that God alone is to be praised, honored and glorified in our salvation:

**Rom 3:27-28** ~ “Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. <sup>28</sup>For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”

**Rom 4:2** ~ “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.”

**Rom 9:15-16** ~ “For [God] says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ <sup>16</sup>So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”

**Rom 11:6** ~ “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.”

**Rom 11:36** ~ “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”

➤Reading through the New Testament reveals that this is certainly not a new issue. For as long as there has been sin, there has been sinful (spiritual) pride – man arrogantly trying to steal the glory that belongs to God. This may be especially true with respect to God’s gracious gift of salvation. May we find our greatest and deepest delight in glorifying God for His every good and perfect gift. May we continue to try to exhaust all human language and every human action in giving God the glory due His name.

**1 Cor 10:31** ~ “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

➤The true Gospel – salvation by God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone – is pride crushing!

**Gal 6:12-15** ~ “It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.<sup>13</sup> For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.<sup>14</sup> But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.<sup>15</sup> For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.”

**Eph 2:8-10** ~ “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,<sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.<sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (cf. Tit.3:3-7; 2Tim.1:9)

**1 Cor 1:26-31** ~ “For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.<sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;<sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,<sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.<sup>30</sup> And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,<sup>31</sup> so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”

➤ As we have seen, in our study of Galatians, the Gospel is not only a stumbling block to unbelievers but can also be one to believers.

✓ **Illust:** “Therefore, apart from the powerful grace of God overcoming our natural disposition to pride, we would always resist the coming of faith into our lives, because by faith Christ takes such dominant control of our lives and reshapes us so much into his image that we can no longer boast in anything good that we do. It does not appeal to the natural mind to be so transformed by Christ that we must give him credit for all the good we do. ...

Saving faith is a resting in that sovereign work of Christ, past, present, and future, which gives all glory to God (1Pet.4:10, 11). Therefore, in one sense saving faith is the easiest thing in the world – as easy as being clay in the potter's hands. But in another sense it is the hardest thing in the world, because human clay hates being shaped and formed by Christ so that he gets all the glory for what we become.

It's not surprising, then, that the Judaizers should find a foothold for their false teaching in the hearts of the recent Galatian converts, just like all kinds of cults and ego-centric fads are able to gain a foothold in the church today. The teaching of the Judaizers did not oppose the pride left in the Galatian believers. It catered to that pride. They said, move on from faith to works; move on from the booster rocket of the Holy Spirit and kick in with the efforts of your flesh (Gal.3:1-5). They offered the law as a means of enjoying one's pride in a morally acceptable way. And so their teaching was not as radical and humbling as Paul's was. It was very appealing to people who wanted to be religious and moral but did not want to become putty in the hands of God” (John Piper; sermon: “O, That Christ Would Be Formed in You!” (Gal.4:12-20); May 15, 1983).

➤ The passage of Scripture that we will be studying intently this morning can be divided into four major sections – each identifying an attempt by the apostle Paul to crush the pride of the Galatians and to awaken them to the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – salvation by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

### 1. **Paul's Admonition (vs.8-11)**

➤ In verse eight, Paul once again reminded the Galatians about it meant to be unsaved: “*Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods*” (vs.8). In saying that they “*did not know God*”, Paul was affirming that before they had received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior they were unsaved – having no saving knowledge of God as their Redeemer or Heavenly Father

(Matt.7:21-23; 1Thess.4:5). For all unbelievers – no matter how religious or “spiritual” – fail to acknowledge God as God (Rom.1:28), and are hostile and at enmity with God (Rom.1:30; 8:7; Col.1:21; Jms.4:4).

Consequently, since they failed to worship the one true God, they *“were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods”* (vs.8). The truth is, everyone in the world is worshipping something or someone. A person is either a child of God (through faith in Christ). or a slave of a false god (or false gods). All throughout our nation, we can see “acts of worship” as people are defending and declaring their gods – the idols of politics, money, power, ideologies, pleasure, physical wellbeing, etc. (see Rom.1:23).

➤ However, after they had professed a faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the Galatians were no longer enslaved to false gods, but had *“come to know God, or rather to be known by God”* (vs.9). This refers not to an abstract, or merely intellectual, knowledge of God but an intimate relationship with God as their heavenly Father.

**Gal 4:4-7** ~ “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, <sup>5</sup>to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. <sup>6</sup>And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ <sup>7</sup>So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.” (cf. Jn.1:11-13)

**John 1:11-13** ~ “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

➤ Paul then pointed out the absurdity of having come to know God as Redeemer and Father, only to *“turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world”* (vs.9; *“elementary principles”* [stoicheion] also vs.3; Col.2:8; 2Pet.3:10, 12). By this he is referring to the religious system of legalism and self-righteousness. In other words, how can you seek to be saved from lawlessness only to be enslaved by the law once again – *“whose slaves you want to be once more”* (vs.9)?

Then Paul exclaimed, *“You observe days and months and seasons and years!”* (vs.10). Having believed the true Gospel – salvation by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone – the Galatians were being deceived into thinking that they must adhere to Jewish laws and customs in order to be saved (e.g. circumcision) – even to the point of observing the Old Testament calendar (e.g. sabbaths, festivals, see Col.2:16-23).

**2 Peter 2:22** ~ “What the true proverb says has happened to them: ‘The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.’” (see Prov.26:11)

➤ To whatever degree, the Judaizers had successfully convinced the Galatians that the true Gospel – God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone – was not sufficient for salvation. It is important to note the severity of Paul’s admonition to the Galatians. Their departure from the true Gospel, their willingness to embrace a self-righteous legalism, compelled the apostle to write: *“I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain”* (vs.11).

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

**Gal 5:7-9** ~ “You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? <sup>8</sup>This persuasion is not from him who calls you. <sup>9</sup>A little leaven leavens the whole lump.”

➤ True believers cannot lose their salvation (see Jn.10:28-29; Eph.1:13-14; Phil.1:6; 1Pet.1:4-5). Those commit apostasy – abandoning the faith they once professed – were never true disciples of Christ (1Jn.2:19). While it can appear (from a human perspective) that someone has lost their salvation, God knows those who are truly His (2Tim.2:19), He knows those whose names are truly/eternally written in *“the book of life”* (Rev.3:5; 13:8; 20:15; 21:27). God knows the difference between those who truly possess Christ, and those who merely profess Christ (Matt.7:21-23).

Paul's concern for the Galatians was not that they lost their salvation, but by not persevering they were showing that they were never saved (Mk.13:13). In that sense, he feared that his labor among them was *"in vain"* (vs.11) – that they were not actually saved, and he would need to evangelize them all over again.

## 2. Paul's Petition (vs.12-16)

➤ With tremendous conviction and compassion, Paul again referred to the Galatians as *"Brothers"* (vs.12; "brethren" or "brothers and sisters" [the fifth of his eleven such references in this letter]). He is pleading with them (*"I entreat you"* [*deomai*]; vs.12) to reconsider their regression back to the law. Without compromising the truth, Paul graciously pleads/begs for them to reconsider their beliefs and behaviors.

➤ Paradoxically, Paul wrote: *"become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong"* (vs.12). That last sentence, *"You did me no wrong"*, indicates that Paul is not taking this personal. While *"astonished"* (1:6), and perhaps righteously indignant, about their departure from the Gospel, Paul wanted them to know that his rebuke was solely for the sake of their salvation. He was concerned for their souls. He had not admonished them as a personal reprisal, but in hopes of returning them to the truth of the Gospel.

In saying, *"become as I am"* Paul is clearly exhorting them to remain true to the Gospel – free from the self-righteous (false) religion of legalism. He added *"for I also have become as you are"* (vs.12). Paul, a Jew and once a Pharisee, knew very well what it was like seek salvation by works. Ironically, he is pleading with Gentiles to not be enslaved to Jewish laws and traditions. Through the Gospel Paul had become free from the law (as the Galatians/Gentiles were), and now the Galatians are becoming enslaved to the law as they have abandoned the Gospel.

**Gal 2:16** ~ "yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified."

**Gal 2:19** ~ "For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God."

**Gal 2:21** ~ "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose."

➤ Paul knew very well what it meant to adhere to a legalistic, self-righteous, pride-affirming religion. For he had personally lived according to such legalism throughout most of his life.

**Phil 3:2-9** ~ "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. <sup>3</sup>For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh – <sup>4</sup>though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. <sup>7</sup>But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup>Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith"

➤ Paul then reminded them of the circumstances that surrounded the initial time in which he proclaimed the Gospel to them: *"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"* (vs.13-14). The exact nature of Paul's *"bodily ailment"* (vs.13) is

unknown, although many have speculated that it was some eye disease like glaucoma (see vs.15; 6:11), or some malady such as epilepsy or malaria, or the physical damage he incurred from being persecuted.

Whatever it was, Paul's condition was *"a trial"* (vs.14) to the Galatians and yet they *"did not scorn"* (*exoutheneō*; count as nothing) *"or despise"* (*ekptyō*; lit. to spit out; reject) the apostle during his time with them (vs.14). They enjoyed a mutually beneficial and loving relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ (Gal.6:10). Paul recounted that they actually *"received"* him *"as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus"* (vs.14). That is, they received him as a messenger of God, and his message of the Gospel as having come directly from God.

➤ He is asking them to examine their ways, imploring them to see that their perspective of him – and, more importantly, their understanding of the Gospel – had changed. They had been deceived, and Paul desperately wanted them to awaken from their spiritual stupor (cf. 3:1). So, he asked, *"What then has become of your blessedness?"* (vs.15). The Judaizers had, to whatever degree, convinced the Galatians that Paul had preached a false (or an incomplete) gospel. It is likely that they had done so by disparaging Paul's reputation, character and/or personality (see vs.16). Paul simply asked the Galatians to ask themselves, "What happened? What brought about this drastic change?"

Paul's love for the Galatians was pure and strong. *"For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me"* (vs.15). Paul may have simply been using a figure of speech, or literally referring to his impaired vision. In either case, the point is that when Paul preached the Gospel to the Galatians they received him and his message with joy and affection. They received him as a preacher of the Gospel, and they received the Gospel he preached as the true Gospel.

**Gal 1:6-7** ~ "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – <sup>7</sup>not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ."

➤ Paul is forcing them to consider what has happened to destroy their relationship, and, more importantly, to destroy their confidence in the Gospel. *"Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?"* (vs.16). Paul had gone from being received *"as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus"* (vs.14) to being treated as an *"enemy"* (vs.16; *echthros*). The Judaizers had deceived the Galatians, and – in the hope of distorting the Gospel – turned them against the apostle Paul.

### 3. Paul's Caution (vs.17-18)

➤ Paul then gives the Galatians a word of caution, warning them of the hidden agenda of the Judaizers. *"They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them"* (vs.17). The Judaizers appealed to the fleshly desires of the Galatians. By inflating their own sense of worth/goodness, and stroking their pride, the Judaizers successfully lured the Galatians away from the true Gospel – salvation by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone – and into a false gospel of self-righteous legalism.

The appropriate response to this passage is not: "This would never happen to me, I could never be turned to a false gospel!" Rather, with sincerity and humility, we must respond to this passage with a greater resolve to study Scripture and to be committed to the spiritual disciplines that will help us persevere in the faith.

In my almost thirty-years of pastoral ministry, I have seen numerous Christians fall into the false gospels of legalism (self-righteousness) or liberalism (worldliness), fall away from the church, or fall away altogether from the faith they once professed. The very nature of temptation is that it is tempting; the very nature of deception is that it is deceiving. We must never think we are somehow immune to such allurements or influences.

**1 Cor 10:12** ~ "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."

➤ Make no mistake, the Judaizers had an ulterior motive. They were not concerned for the souls of the Galatians, but for their own reputations: *“They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them”* (vs.17). The Galatians were merely “notches on the belts” of the Judaizers, who wanted nothing more than to increase the number of converts to Judaistic legalism. This not only inflated their own pride, but protected them from being persecuted as a true Christian:

**Gal 6:12-13** ~ “It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. <sup>13</sup>For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.”

Matt 23:15 ~ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”

➤ Paul readily acknowledged that *“It is always good to be made much of”* (vs.18), but only *“for a good purpose”* (vs.18). Everyone loves to be loved, and people generally like being encouraged and celebrated. But when that encouragement is insincere or dishonest, or when it is impugned with false motives, it is actually very damaging and hurtful. As a loving brother in Christ, Paul was warning the Galatians that the Judaizers were using them – deceiving them – for their own selfish purposes.

Paul sincerely loved and cared for the Galatians, and not just to their faces: *“and not only when I am present with you”* (vs.18). Paul was cautioning them not because he was personally wounded, or had any ulterior motives, but because he was deeply concerned for their souls as they were being deceived into believing a false gospel.

#### 4. Paul's Passion (vs.19-20)

➤ Paul affectionately referred to the Galatians as his *“little children”* (vs.19). As their spiritual father, the one who first preached the Gospel to them and witnessed their profession of faith in Christ, Paul had a vested interest in their Christian walk (see 1Tim.1:2; Tit.1:4).

**Phil 1:8** ~ “For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.”

**Phil 2:17** ~ “Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.”

**1 Cor 4:15** ~ “For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

➤ Of the Galatians Paul wrote: *“I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!”* (vs.19). This imagery is striking as Paul relates the pain of his ministry to the Galatians to the labor pains of childbirth (“anguish of childbirth” [*ōdinō*]; only Gal.4:19; 27; Rev.12:2). It is likely that Paul is analogously equating the Galatians’ regression to legalism to that of a baby refusing to be born, or that of an especially difficult or painful delivery.

➤ But the apostle had vowed to not give up on them *“until Christ is formed”* in them! (vs.19). He was not merely a revival evangelist concerned only with the statistics of the number of his converts. Paul cared for their souls, and would not give up on them until they became spiritually mature in Christ.

✓ **Illust:** “Note the Apostle does not say, ‘Of whom I travail in birth again until I be formed in you,’ but ‘until Christ be formed in you.’ The false apostles had torn the form of Christ out of the hearts of the Galatians and substituted their own form. Paul endeavors to reform them, or rather reform Christ in them” (Martin Luther; *Luther’s Commentary on Galatians*; 4:19).

**Eph 4:11-14** ~ “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, <sup>12</sup>to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup>until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to **mature** manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, <sup>14</sup>so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”  
[“mature” (*teleios*); perfect or complete]

**Col 1:28-29** ~ “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone **mature** in Christ. <sup>29</sup>For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.” [“mature” (*teleios*); perfect or complete]

➤ This was the heart of every apostle, and is the heart of every true Christian pastor and teacher, and should be the heart of every Christian. The Galatians’ spiritual maturity was Paul’s ultimate goal for the Galatians, as well as his most immediate desire for them: *“I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you”* (vs.20). The Greek word translated *“perplexed”* (*aporeō*) refers to being confused, at a loss or uncertain. Not being present with them, the apostle was uncertain about how to reach them and how they would receive this letter.

✓ **Illust:** A common saying has it that a letter is a dead messenger. Something is lacking in all writing. You can never be sure how the written page will affect the reader, because his mood, his circumstances, his affections are so changeable. It is different with the spoken word. If it is harsh and ill-timed it can always be remodeled. No wonder the Apostle expresses the wish that he could speak to the Galatians in person. He could change his voice according to their attitude. If he saw that they were repentant he could soften the tone of his voice. If he saw that they were stubborn he could speak to them more earnestly. This way he did not know how to deal with them by letter. If his Epistle is too severe it will do more damage than good. If it is too gentle, it will not correct conditions. But if he could be with them in person he could change his voice as the occasion demanded” (Martin Luther;

*Luther’s Commentary on Galatians; 4:20).*

## Conclusion

➤ Arrogance, spiritual pride, can especially harden a person’s heart against the Gospel and against those who proclaim the Gospel (against the Bible and against those who preach the Bible). Sometimes, “It takes hard words to break hard hearts.”

**Gal 6:14** ~ “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

**1 Cor 1:28-31** ~ “God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup>so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup>And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, <sup>31</sup>so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”