

THE APPLICATION OF LOVE TO CHURCHES GALATIANS 4:8-20

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

On the night of December 16, 1773, a crowd variously estimated at between 30 and 130 men, many dressed as Mohawk Indians, boarded three British ships in Boston Harbor. They proceeded to dump 342 chests of tea from the East India Company into the cold waters of the Atlantic. The value of the cargo in today's currency was estimated to be about \$1,700,000.

Earlier in the evening some 6000 Bostonians gathered at the Old South Meeting House. The Sons of Liberty organized this meeting because they were upset by a tax imposed upon the American Colonies earlier in the year by the British. The law also gave the East India Company a monopoly over the tea trade to the colonies.

Americans were upset over all of these regulations, especially because they were imposed by the British Parliament across the ocean without having any representation in that legislative body. The Boston Tea Party was a key event that led to the American Revolution. Our Founding Fathers placed a high value upon freedom, freedom from rules, especially those imposed upon a resentful public.

Fortunately we Americans today live in freedom, don't we, without having to worry about rules. Except perhaps for this minor detail. (PROJECTOR ON--- UNITED STATES CODE) This is the United States Code. It is organized into 53 categories. It is revised and republished every six years. There is no agreement about how many federal crimes are included here. Estimates range between 3000 and 5000. There are also many regulations which can be enforced criminally. Again there is no agreement about the number of these. Estimates range between 10,000 and 300,000.

In addition to this, federal agencies issue their own rules. Between 1995 and 2016 there were 88,899 new rules which were issued. Of course this does not include state and local laws and regulations. There is a general recognition that it is challenging to deal with all of these laws and rules, whether we are trying to pay our taxes or run a small business or build a house. (PROJECTOR OFF)

This was also an issue in the early church. We have seen that the Apostle Paul had been involved in planting new churches in the Roman province of Galatia in Asia Minor. These new churches were composed primarily of Gentiles. Paul's message of the gospel promised a certain freedom. But Jewish Christians came along and tried to convince these Gentile Christians that they needed now to follow the law of Moses, as described in the Old Testament.

We know from ancient Jewish writings that these rules as applied by the rabbis were organized into 635 categories. But there were many subcategories. For example, in the Babylonian Talmud, there are 24 chapters and 157 pages describing the rules necessary to properly observe the Sabbath. So these Judaizers, these Jews who claimed to be Christians, came along and tried to convince the Galatian Christians that they had to buy into this system.

Paul in this letter has been saying, "Enough, already." The Gospel is believe in Jesus, and you will be saved. Justification, being declared righteous, comes simply by accepting the forgiveness of sins offered to us in Jesus Christ. It does not come from any works or merit that we can offer. Christianity primarily involves a relationship with Jesus, not a rule based system. Now the Bible, especially the New Testament, gives us guidelines about how to love God and how to love other people. The passage before us this morning develops that theme.

I.

In vv. 8-11 of Galatians #4 we find that LOVE MEANS DISCOURAGING A RETURN TO LEGALISM. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. LOVE MEANS DISCOURAGING...) In v. 8 Paul writes, **"Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods."**

These Gentile people from Asia Minor came from a variety of pagan backgrounds. For the most part they were polytheistic. They believed in many gods. There were the Roman and Greek gods that we know a little about from mythology. Then there were local gods. Then also in the first century the Roman emperor was to be treated as a god. So these Galatians had an awareness of the supernatural, but they did not know the true God. They were bound to certain religious traditions.

Today most of us do not come from polytheistic backgrounds. But we may have been slaves to things which were of no eternal value, things which had a certain control over our lives. Perhaps it was an addiction. In our area there are some who are controlled in an unhealthy way by gambling. Even a job or a career can be a source of a certain kind of enslavement. It can demand so much of our time and energy that mate and family are left with little time or energy.

Paul continues in v. 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?"**

This term "elementary principles" appeared back in v. 3. Pastor Steve pointed out last week that the word has been understood by scholars in different ways. In the first century most thinkers believed that the four basic forces of the universe were earth, air, water, and fire. Many of the gods were related to these basic forces. Each of the religions involving these gods had certain rules and practices. We know about some of them. We don't know about all of them.

However we understand Paul's terminology here, it seems clear that the complicated rules of Judaism as it was practiced in the first century are put in this category. The issue facing the Galatian Christians was that Jews claiming to be Christians wanted to put the Gentile Christians under these Jewish laws. In the Gospels we see how Jesus dealt with some of these ridiculous rules. He was always getting in trouble with the religious leaders because they had decided that healing on the Sabbath was a violation of the rules. Jesus came along and healed people on the Sabbath. So the rabbis and priests decided that Jesus was bad and could not be the promised Old Testament Messiah. So convincing the Gentile Christians to immerse themselves in this system was a return to legalism, a kind of slavery.

Notice also that Paul speaks of the Galatians as coming to know God. But then he almost corrects himself, or at least describes what is the more accurate statement of their relationship with God. He describes it as having come to be known by God. Do you ever ponder the words of "Amazing Grace"? "I once was lost but now am found"--- not that I found God, but that He found me. John Newton, the author of that song, was writing very Biblically in his choice of words.

God is the initiator in this salvation deal. (JOHN 6:44) In John #6 v. 44 Jesus is quoted as saying, **"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."** Then a few chapters later He is again quoted. He says, according to John 10:27-28 (JOHN 10:27-28), **"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish..."** What a great assurance and a great promise! What confidence we can have in knowing that we have been found by God!

The verb that Paul uses in our verse to describe knowing God and God knowing us is a word that is usually used for a personal, intimate knowledge of something or someone. Because God knows us who have trusted in Jesus, we can have an assurance of eternal life. That eternal life is a present possession. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Paul continues his discussion of legalism in v. 10. He says, **"You observe days and months and seasons and years!"** Part of the Jewish religious system in the time of Jesus and Paul involved feasts and holidays and the weekly observance of the Sabbath. Other religions have similar traditions and rules. The Old Testament did require Jewish men to show up at the temple in Jerusalem three times a year for the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. There were other special days like the Day of Atonement and Rosh Hashanah. The Old Testament also did require rest on the Sabbath. Maybe the Judaizers had convinced some of the Galatian Gentiles that a good first step in their movement into Judaism was to begin these observances. It required a little less commitment than having men get circumcised.

Religious traditions and special days are not necessarily a bad thing. We have family traditions and religious traditions that can serve a good purpose. The problem is when we start making hard and fast rules and say that observing these rules is necessary to win favor with God.

Sabbath observance has had a long history in the Christian church. Sunday has often been called the Christian Sabbath. The problem is that it is not. The Old Testament is clear that it is the seventh day which is the Sabbath. No work was to be done on this day. But the Old Testament also said that the Sabbath law means that every seventh year agricultural lands are to lie fallow. I have not encountered any Christian farmers who try to do that. The reason that we Christians tend to worship and meet together on Sundays was that the early church developed this tradition because it was the first day of the week when Jesus rose from the dead.

We need to realize that all of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament, with the expectation that they should be observed by Christians, except for the Fourth Commandment, the Sabbath Commandment. Observance of the Sabbath Commandment was specifically regarded by God as a test of Israel's adherence to the Mosaic Law, the law handed down by God to Israel on Mt. Sinai. But the church is not Israel.

In #14 of the New Testament Book of Romans the Apostle Paul is talking about Christians who are weak in faith, who are not mature Christians. (ROMANS 14:5) In v. 5 of Romans 14 he writes, **“One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.”** In other words, Paul doesn't see one day as inherently more holy than another. But if some Christians want to treat a particular day as special, fine.

So meeting on Sundays is fine, It is a good tradition. Some churches have services on Saturday night. That's fine, too. If you look closely at the Old Testament description of the Sabbath day, you will find that the emphasis was not really on a day of worship. The focus was on having a day free of work. So we don't have to be legalistic about that, but we can recognize that there is a good principle worthy of following here, that we need some kind of rest in our weekly schedule. For us preacher types, Sunday is not it. I try to take Thursdays off as something of a day of rest from my regular schedule. We probably would all do well to see that we have some kind of rest during the week from our normal schedule. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Paul continues in v. 11 of our passage: **“I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.”** It was hard work to do what Paul and Barnabas did in bringing the gospel to this area that is now located in Turkey. They traveled much of the way on foot. They stayed in different people's homes. They faced lots of opposition. At times they were run out of town. At a place called Lystra Paul was stoned and left for dead. Paul is concerned that he invested all of this blood and sweat and tears in vain. Some of these Galatian Christians are in danger of falling back into a system of legalism.

This is also an American temptation. Many of us grow up hearing platitudes like “You have to earn your way in life,” or “the American dream is accomplished by pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.” There may be a certain amount of wisdom in these sayings. But we need to be clear that the Christian gospel is very simple. Eternal

salvation and forgiveness of sins cannot be earned or merited. It can only be received by faith, by trusting in Jesus who died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins.

II.

Genuine love means that Christians should not fall back into legalism. In vv. 12-18 of our passage we learn that **LOVE MEANS SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN THE FACE OF POWER GRABS**. (PROJECTOR ON--- LOVE MEANS SPEAKING THE...) Paul says in v. 12, **"Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong."** Here the apostle's tone changes. He shifts from a firm, fatherly admonition to a warm, personal appeal. He wants his readers to become like he is, a person who lives under grace. The issue is not primarily that he is personally offended by the actions of the Galatian Christians. The issue is a theological one. It is an issue of their relationship with God. He wants to make sure that they have the right object of faith.

He continues in vv. 13 & 14: **"You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, 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."** Paul had some kind of physical problem which resulted in his stay among these Galatians. We don't know exactly what the problem was. Some have suggested that it was an attack of malaria that prompted him to stay in an area that was cooler and drier. Some have suggested that it was a problem with epilepsy. Perhaps the most common suggestion is that it was some kind of eye problem. In v. 15 Paul speaks of the Galatians willing to pluck out their eyes to help him. At the end of this letter he speaks about signing the letter in his own hand with large print.

Whatever the problem was, Paul was not in full health when he was with them. His condition could have been a reason for them to avoid him. But instead he was warmly received. People were hospitable toward him. Perhaps there was extra work involved in caring for him. When he first showed up in the region, there were no Christian people to receive him.

Paul did display supernatural power which got their attention. Acts #14 describes one such incident. Listen to what happened: **"Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. 9 He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, 10 said in a loud voice, 'Stand upright on your feet.' And he sprang up and began walking. 11 And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, 'The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!' 12 Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker."** So this led to an opportunity for them to explain the gospel, to tell about the source of their power.

It is ironic to consider here that there was apparently no sudden, supernatural cure for Paul's ailment, whatever it was. He healed a lame man. But he could not heal himself. There is a warning here to watch out for TV preachers who claim that if we just have

enough faith, God is bound to cure our ailment whatever it is. God occasionally provides miraculous healing in response to our prayers. But that is not always, and perhaps not often, the case. He has other purposes, as He apparently had here with Paul.

Verse 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.”** Paul’s powerful preaching, the dramatic story of his own conversion, and miracles such as happened at Lystra combined to produce a positive response in many of these Galatian cities. Many responded by believing in Jesus. They saw significant changes in their own lives, and they appreciated Paul’s part in bringing the message to them. They saw it as a blessing.

In fact they would have gouged out their own eyes to help Paul. Whether he is speaking in the figurative language of hyperbole or speaking in reference to an eye problem, we don’t know. The point is that the Galatians really appreciated his ministry among them. But now Paul senses that their turn toward legalism is taking away some of that first joy. That sense of blessing is going away.

He adds in v. 16, **“Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?”** Judaizers have come along and raised doubt about Paul and his message. They have argued that belief in Jesus is not enough to produce righteousness with God. Paul has not been telling them the whole story. You Galatian Gentiles need to be circumcised and start observing the Jewish feast days and follow the law. You shouldn’t completely believe what Paul told you.

Paul says, “I gave you the straight gospel. You experienced forgiveness of sins. You saw personal changes. You had joy. You had a sense of blessing. Now you are treating me like an enemy, when I simply have told you the truth.”

Verse 17: **“They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.”** Paul questions the motives of these Judaizers. They are trying to cut Paul out of the picture. They want these new Christians to be drawn to them.

That is often what happens with the cults. They look for followers among new Christians or untaught Christians. They try to get them into their religious systems which typically have lots of rules and requirements for good works to win God’s approval.

But then there is also a danger among genuine Christians and pastors and churches. We can get overly concerned about our image and our reputation and our numbers such that we treat people as objects and numbers and assets to improve our own image or power. That is never the right way to go.

Paul continues in v. 18, **“It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you...”** In other words, it is good to be courted in a good way. It is the right thing to do for Christians to genuinely care about others and

to want them to understand the truth of the gospel. Paul cares enough about these Galatians to stress the truth of his gospel message and to admonish them firmly about the dangers of legalism. He cares enough about them to speak the truth in the face of this power grab.

In the first church in which I was a pastor, I came into a congregation with a lot of young families. There was an older couple who had a lot of power in the congregation. The husband was head of the church board. He was the primary adult Sunday school teacher. He was a psychologist by profession. So he also did counseling in the church.

Then his wife was the church pianist. She taught a ladies' Bible study. She was also the superintendent of the Sunday school program. There was a lot of good that they did. But there were two things which this couple did which bothered me a great deal. One was that they tended to make fun of each other in public situations. With a lot of young couples around, I thought that this was a terrible example. Then also the wife in particular had this habit of embarrassing people in front of others. A number of women complained to me about this. I encouraged them to talk to her about it. That's the best Biblical way to deal with it. But they were all afraid to do that.

So in one week I saw two different situations where she embarrassed people in public situations. So I decided that I needed to talk to her about it. I knew that it was a somewhat risky situation. But I decided to meet with her. In what I thought was a gentle way I referenced these two situations and pointed out that people were sometimes hurt when she embarrassed them in front of others.

She said very little and left. But she proceeded to get rid of me from the church. I was treated as the enemy. There were secret meetings, and one day after church, I was simply handed an envelope with a letter in which I was asked by the church board to resign. So I did. We had recently bought a small house. We had a baby. I was given one month's salary, and I was out. Doing the right thing can be costly. Eventually this church went out of existence. I was not surprised to see it happen. Love means speaking the truth in the face of power grabs.

III.

Then finally in vv. 19 and 20 we find that LOVE MEANS A LOVING CARE FOR FELLOW CHRISTIANS. (III. LOVE MEANS A LOVING CARE FOR FELLOW CHRISTIANS.) We find this expression from the apostle in v. 19: **"...my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!"**

Here Paul expresses his concern for the Galatian Christians as a parent, and not just as a parent, but as a mother, and not just as a mother, but as a pregnant mother. He describes himself as being in labor. Such is his compassion and concern for the Galatians.

He is not wanting a little Paul to be formed in them. He is wanting the image of Jesus to be formed in them. Such is the goal that we should always have in Christian ministry.

We will always have something of an effect on other Christians. But our goal is not to make them like us, but rather like Jesus.

Verse 20: **“I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.”** It is always better to be physically present to share the gospel with people, to teach the Bible, to correct Christians when they get off track like these Galatians were. But obviously physical distance and geography were a problem here.

Paul expresses a kind of confusion here about how quickly these Galatians have gone astray. He spent significant time with many of them. He shared the gospel with them. He saw them get started on the right track. He saw the joy they had in becoming Christians. Yet now they seem to have so quickly gone off into this legalism deal.

Sometimes there can be a kind of attraction to rules. If you know that you are following the rules, then perhaps we can feel like we are earning our way, or that we are deserving God's favor. But that is not the basis of the Christian story. The story of the gospel is that we are connected by grace to the real God through faith in Jesus. That's it.

Now a genuine faith in Jesus should be reflected in a love for God and a love for other people. We see that here in Paul in his genuine concern for these Galatian Christians. I was sitting in the waiting room at Boulder City Hospital on Monday, waiting for my wife to have a medical procedure. I was near the reception desk. So I could hear the reason that everyone gave to the receptionist for being there.

There were just two people who came to visit any patients in the hospital during the hour and a half that I was there. But they were both people from our congregation who came to visit Lois from our congregation. It made me feel good inside to see that our people were just doing what Christian people do in loving fellow Christians who are under the weather. I went to visit Lois a little bit later.

Jesus told His followers this (JOHN 13:35), according to John #13 v. 35: **“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”** So let's always be on the lookout for opportunities to show love for other people, especially for fellow Christians. Maybe it will mean visiting somebody in the hospital. Maybe it will mean helping somebody with a financial need. Maybe it will simply mean giving our full attention and a listening ear to someone who is dealing with a problem. Maybe it will mean admonishing somebody who is falling into the trap of legalism.