

False teachers and receptive hearts

Galatians 4:12-20

Pastor Tim Melton

¹² Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. ¹³ You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, ¹⁴ and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. ¹⁶ Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? ¹⁷ They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out that you may make much of them. ¹⁸ It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, ¹⁹ my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! ²⁰ I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

His name was Saul. He was a Jew who lived in the first century. From the world's perspective his future was very bright. Phil. 3:4-14 tells us that, "he was circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless." He so loved Judaism and so hated Christians that he played a role in the arrests that led to some of the deaths of first century Christians.

Being a devout Jewish leader was not as fulfilling as some may think. The Jewish religion was a life of endless rules. A Jew lived his life constantly surrounded by an ocean of regulations which dictated every

part of his life. There were laws concerning washing your hands, how to honor the Sabbath, how to plow your fields, how to plant your seed, what offerings to give to the temple, what kind of food to eat, how to prepare it, what you do when you wake up in the morning, what you can and cannot eat, what you can and cannot wear, how to groom yourself, how to conduct business, who you can marry, how to observe the holidays, how to pray, how to know God's word, how to speak to others, and even how to discipline others who broke these laws.

Trying to be near God was a grueling exercise that no one could perfectly obey. Those who most desired God were often driven to exhaustion and legalism in the midst of their pursuit. It was a godless exercise of trying to be good enough so that one could be made right with God. This was the lifestyle of Saul and the other Pharisees who were the religious leaders of Saul's day.

In his younger years Saul had put his confidence in who he was and what he had accomplished (Philippians 3). After Saul became a follower of Jesus Christ everything changed, even his name. He was now known as Paul. He recognized His sin and that it was impossible to be made right with God on one's own merit. He had experienced the endless grace of God and the freedom that only comes through Christ. He knew the difference between spiritual slavery as an orthodox Jew and the freedom found in being a child of God.

With this good news of Jesus Christ Paul eventually traveled to Galatia, where he and others started new churches. They preached the gospel, people believed, they disciplined the believers and formed new churches. They followed this process multiple times in various cities in Galatia. Unfortunately, after they left these churches Jewish false teachers came in and began to teach a false gospel. The false teachers taught that, yes, the Galatians needed to believe in Jesus, but to be real Christians they also needed to follow all of the Jewish laws. In response to this Paul then wrote a letter to the Galatians. It was then circulated to all the churches that they had started in Galatia.

Galatians 4:12-20 is where these pages will now focus. Up to this point in the book of Galatians Paul had been a distant debater, proving his point and seeking to convince the Galatians that he was trustworthy, that he was called of God, that the Gospel that he preached was the true gospel and that the transformation that the Galatians experienced was real. Like a lawyer who is breaking down every perspective and argument of a case, he sought to leave the Galatians no option but to judge in his favor.

Now, in Galatians 4:12-20, Paul changes his approach. He loved the Galatians. They were his spiritual children, but in the previous chapters Paul had been "raising his voice" in the hopes that they would turn away from the way of destruction and back to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It would be like a mild-mannered parent who yells at their child, as he or she runs ahead of their parents and starts to cross a busy street without stopping.

It is not anger. It is not impatience. It is an expression of love that cannot remain silent as the child wanders into danger. Maybe you are familiar with this kind of unconditional love that cries out for the well-being or salvation for a friend or a loved-one. It is a mixture of conviction and compassion. We see this combination in Christ's life. He could bless children, but also confront hypocritical Pharisees. He was both the Lion and the Lamb. Paul possessed both compassion and conviction as well. It is a characteristic

of those who are continuing to walk with Christ. Our convictions in regards to Christ grow, but it does not result in self-righteous or judgment. Instead these convictions result in the awareness of one's sin and God's grace. It results in a compassion that longs for others to come to know Jesus Christ and also a conviction that cares more about their salvation than their approval.

In Galatians 4:12 we see these words:

¹² Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong.

Paul is pleading with the Galatians. Paul had walked away from a legalistic Jewish life that had held him in spiritual slavery. His life was transformed when he met Jesus Christ. He was freed. His salvation did not come because of who he was or what he had done. It was made possible because of who Christ is and what He had done. Now to God Paul was not known as a Jew or a Galatian. Paul was now a child of God. That was now his true identity. He walked away from an unrelenting pursuit of perfection and found in Christ forgiveness and grace. Paul had escaped from the Mosaic Law and found the same grace that the Galatians had known.

Paul had become like them. He was no longer pursuing righteousness through obedience of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. Now the Galatians had done the opposite. They had turned from freedom in Christ and turned to the crushing burden of the law. Paul is telling the Galatians to become as he is, which in reality is them returning back to the freedom in Christ that they had known.

The Galatians have done Paul no wrong, so he assures them that he has no motivation to do them wrong, even though he has been blamed of doing that.

¹³ You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first,¹⁴ and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

We don't know for sure what Paul is referring to here. Some say he is referring to blindness, malaria or the wounds that he sustained when he was stoned in Galatia. In one way or another his condition at that time had been a burden to the Galatians. Somehow Paul had been a burden to them, but in the midst of this hardship they did not allow it to be a reason to reject him. Instead they received him as a true messenger of God. The Galatians received him as well as they would have welcomed Christ if He had come.

¹⁵ What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me.¹⁶ Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?

Paul is reminding them that they had been such a blessing to him. How could they now turn their back on the faith that had transformed them and the messenger whom they had received with open arms? Paul continues, reminding them that they were so devoted to him that they would have gouged out their own eyes and given them to him if it would have made things better.

Paul then confronted them with this question, *“Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?”* Do you know people like that? They love to hear what you have to say, until you say something that they don’t agree with. They love your words of truth, until the truth brings judgment or sheds light on their darkness. It is disheartening, but the truth of the gospel will at times bring this type of response.

In John 3:19-20 Jesus says, *“The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.”*

The purpose of our words is not to bring popularity. As we speak the gospel, our words are to bring life to those who will receive them. That was the source of Paul’s sadness. He had spoken the most loving words to the Galatians, which were the truth of the gospel, and now they seemed to be responding with rejection.

Now we must take note that the people of Galatia were notorious for being fickle and constantly changing their minds. This was likely a result of discontentment, self-centered living, and lack of conviction. When evident in the life of a Christian, it often points to a loss of Christ being one’s first love (Revelation 2:2-3).

Giving in to temptation or drifting from Christ is always a symptom of losing one’s first love. When we sin, we show that we desire something more than we desire Christ. It could be that Christ has been pushed aside because our desire for success, companionship, acceptance or pleasure. The Galatians had firsthand experience with Christ, and now they were drawing away from the Gospel. This was evidence that they had a problem that was somehow connected to the desires of their heart.

James 1:12-15 describes it in these words, *“But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”*

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

The Jewish false teachers were treating the Galatians as if they were very important, but it was not with pure motives. They wanted to shut the Galatians out of the freedom of the gospel and put on them a dependence on the Jewish law, so the false teachers would be more important and essential. There was nothing wrong with the Galatians being treated important, because in Paul’s eyes they were, but they needed to evaluate the motives of the false teachers.

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

Paul was writing to his “spiritual children.” He was taken back again to the pre-birth days, when he was still vying for their salvation. He thought they had been born again and matured beyond spiritual infancy. Perhaps he was mistaken. Those Galatians who were truly in the faith needed to grow up in the faith. For others of the Galatians Paul found himself once again under the burden of pre-evangelism, pleading to God and to them for their salvation. Paul would not rest until Christ was formed in them. Paul wished he could be there with the Galatians to show his love for them in person, because he was so saddened and confused about their desertion of the truth that they now clung to.

Below are further thoughts that help us think more deeply about certain issues that we have found in Galatians 4:12-20.¹

False religion, while having the outward appearance of piety and good works, is almost always creature-centered. This is its hallmark and the source of its hypocrisy. It often seeks to convince us that we can be made holy by our own efforts and that God is here to serve our agenda. It attracts people because it is self-centered instead of God-centered. This is why false prophets are said to flatter and “deceive the hearts of the simple by good words and fair speeches” (Rom. 16:18). As their God is their own belly, they typically seek some advantage for themselves in this world (Rom. 16:18; Jude 1:16). And just as the devil transforms himself into an angel of light to deceive, these too present themselves as ministers of Christ (2 Cor. 11:13-15). Such teachers deceive because they themselves are deceived (2 Tim. 3:13), and bound by the chords of their own greed and ambition (Prov. 5:22). And as they did here as well, they entice people who are just escaping from sin with promises of freedom, whilst being themselves slaves to their own corrupt desires (2 Pet. 2:18-19). Such teachers are destitute of the truth (1 Tim. 6:5). Who though flaunting their piety and knowledge of the Lord, have not his Spirit (Rom. 8:9), and who while having a form of godliness, continually deny the power thereof (2 Tim. 3:5).

And yet, **these evil workers cannot operate in a vacuum. They must have an audience if they are going to do anything. Those who listen to them, therefore, are usually, though not always, like them: self-centered, faithless, fickle, double-minded, and lacking in steadfastness:** ever learning but never coming to the knowledge of the truth (Prov. 14:15, 18; 2 Tim. 3:7).

And this is the heart of Paul’s complaint against the Galatians (Gal. 4:17-18). **The Galatians had not only lost their first love** (Gal. 4:8-20), they had been moved away from the blessed Truth which had been delivered to them by a person they considered on a par with an angel, even Jesus Christ! (Gal. 4:14). This they did in response to the flattering fair speeches of some self-aggrandizing legalistic charlatans who sold them bondage for blessings! (Gal. 4:17). Why did this happen? **This happened, in part, because the Galatians were not firmly grounded in the Truth** (Gal. 4:19). But it also happened because in the

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flesh and as historians explain, the Galatians were fickle, self-centered and wanted to be made much of **(they were being tempted and tested in the area of their former weaknesses)**. In short, the Galatians were being drawn in by the devil's messengers because they did not remain steadfast in the Truth.

Paul's true message, by contrast to the false teachers, was God-centered. He preached that salvation was not by man's works, but rather by God's work (Gal. 2:16, 20). And that this salvific atoning work could only be received by faith alone in God's Son alone (Gal. 3:1-5). Because Paul's gospel was Christ-centered it drew insults, persecutions and nearly cost him his life in Galatia itself, where he was stoned and left for dead! (Acts 14:19). This is likely what prompts Paul's statement in verse 13 concerning his bodily ailment and the trial which the Galatians were faced with as he preached. Why would anyone listen to a bruised and battered little man who is trembling (at the thought of being stoned again) whilst he preaches? And yet, the Galatians listened by God's grace, and were converted by God's grace. Such is the true gospel of our blessed hope: *"It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power"* (1 Cor. 15:43). And, *"Yea, ... all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution"* (2 Tim. 3:12). This was Paul's life and that of the Apostles and disciples of the early church.

We are continuously warned throughout the Bible to beware of false teachers and prophets and the fruit of the false "self-centered, hypocritical" religion they peddle (see e.g., Matt. 7:15-20; 24:24; 2 Tim. 4:3-4; Acts 20:28-30; 2 Pet. 2:1-22; 3:14-18; 1 Jn. 4:1-6; and the verses quoted above). Were we entirely safe from such deceivers, we would need no warning at all. Knowing this, we must heed those continual warnings and learn to recognize the hallmarks of false religion and its apostles and prophets as well as those weaknesses which all of us possess, and by which the Adversary seeks to exploit us. Ultimately, it is critical for our own spiritual well-being, and that of our brethren, that we be not tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, but become firmly established in the faith and able to discern false religion and its tares from true religion and its wheat.

1. Is my Christianity God-centered or self-centered?

2. Have I lost my first love?

3. Am I grounded in scripture?

May we each move forward in our faith, seeking to be made into Christ's likeness for God's glory.