

This morning we are in Galatians 4:8-20. Let's read.

Gal 4:8 NIV Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.

Gal 4:9 But now that you know God -- or rather are known by God -- how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?

Gal 4:10 You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!

Gal 4:11 I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.

Gal 4:12 I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you. You did me no wrong.

Gal 4:13 As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you,

Gal 4:14 and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself.

Gal 4:15 Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.

Gal 4:16 Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

Gal 4:17 Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them.

Gal 4:18 It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you.

Gal 4:19 My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you,

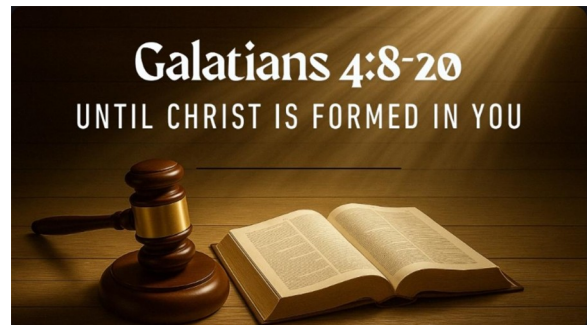
Gal 4:20 how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!

As you listen to these scriptures -- whether you're familiar with these kinds of scriptures or not -- **as you listen to these scriptures, I trust you're hearing Paul -- the author -- Paul's deep affection for the believers in Galatia.**

You listen to the way he expresses himself to these people that he's writing this letter to -- that he's writing this word of God to. When he cries, "How could you?" -- he's not berating them. He's expressing his deep anguish that **they seem to be returning to their old ways.**

He's concerned about them. He pleads with them. He is perplexed by their behavior. He's like a parent weeping over a wayward child. In fact, he says as much in verse 19. He says,

Gal 4:19 My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you,



Like a mother giving birth, Paul was integral in their spiritual birth into new life in Christ Jesus. Now he's afraid that they are turning away from the Lord, and he has to labor again for them to be regenerated in Christ. That's his passion. That's his burden.

That's his heart. He's crying out for the people.

And if you find these scriptures to be too repetitive -- with what Paul has already stated in the previous chapters, and what he's about to state in the upcoming chapters -- or you find them to be too personal -- he just seems to be so, like, too personal -- or he seems to be too direct, **it's because the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the word of God that is communicated through a human being, is always expressed through the emotion and heart of that human being.**

You'll notice that throughout the Bible you see the way that the prophets, and the teachers, and the apostles, and the disciples -- that when they express the truths of God, there is deep emotion. There is the very definite personality that they have that is shining out, that is coming forth. **And the Holy Spirit is doing that deliberately -- so that we understand that this is the communication of God coming to us through human beings.** And so here, Paul is deeply emotional about the Galatian believers.

In **Galatians 1** particularly verses **11-24** -- Paul described how he laid aside his privilege and prestige for the sake of the Lord's calling. **His zeal for the traditions of his fathers, was replaced with a zeal -- with a fervency, with a passion -- for the Lord.** And he gladly undertook an arduous ministry to preach Jesus Christ among the Gentiles -- the non-Jews -- like these beloved believers in Galatia.

And as you go through all of Paul's epistles -- his letters -- when he's writing to the believers in different locations -- if you go through all the epistles, it becomes very clear that Paul thinks of these precious believers in Galatia like he does the precious believers in Jerusalem, and Samaria, and Judea, and Antioch, and Rome, and Corinth, and Ephesus, and Philippi, and Colossae, and Thessalonica.

Paul's deep love for his brothers and sisters in the Lord -- Jews and Gentiles alike -- which is expressed in his longing for their spiritual formation. **He is longing for them to be growing spiritually.** His deep desire in the Lord -- that they would grow in the Lord -- that desire to see Christ formed in them, is his joy. He is so joyful. He is so glad when the people that he's speaking to are growing in the Lord -- that Christ is being formed in them. That is his joy in the world, his glory in the Lord, and his hope for the church being prepared -- being made ready -- for Jesus's return.

So when he does this -- when he says, "I'm in this calling, I'm in this ministry, I'm going from place to place, I'm suffering hardship -- all to minister to people the gospel message -- don't fall away, don't turn away from this true gospel message, don't turn to any false gospel" -- why is he doing this? Because he is passionate about wanting to see the people that he's speaking to, grow in the Lord, and know the true and living God.

Now, here are the questions that Paul's love prompts us to consider:

1. **Do we love people?** -- particularly, do we love our brothers and sisters in the Lord -- like Paul?
2. **Do we labor for them to be conformed to the image of Christ?** Not to conform to our expectations, or obey our directives, or to please us.
3. **Do we eagerly desire for Christ to be formed in every believer?** Is that the heartbeat of our lives? Is that what we long for?

Now, with his heart overflowing with love for the believers -- for these Galatians -- **here are three pleas that Paul makes to the Galatians, and to us.** The first one is this. He says:

1. Don't turn back to weak and miserable forces.

Before we knew God, we were slaves. We were enslaved.

We were under the control of:

- people,
- things,
- ideologies,
- passions, and
- spiritual entities who were, by nature, not gods.

But now that we know the true and living God -- as

Todd Wilson puts it in his commentary:

- ★ **to be known by God**, to have been chosen in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world -- that's in **Ephesians 1:4**
- ★ **to be kept as the apple of his eye**, precious to the Lord, to be hidden under the shadow of his wing -- that's in **Psalms 17:8**
- ★ **to have our name written** in the Book of Life -- that's in **Revelation 20:15**
- ★ **to know it's our Father's good pleasure** to give us the kingdom -- that's in **Luke 12:32**

What utter insanity it would be to turn our back on so generous a God!

If we come to know that this is the way God loves us --

- this is the way that he receives us --
- this is the way that he calls us his own and he adopts us as his children --
- and he continues to build us up in this way --
- if we understand that this is what the Lord is doing for us...

what utter insanity it would be to turn our back on so generous a God!

That's the truth that Paul is trying to get across to the Galatians, and to us.

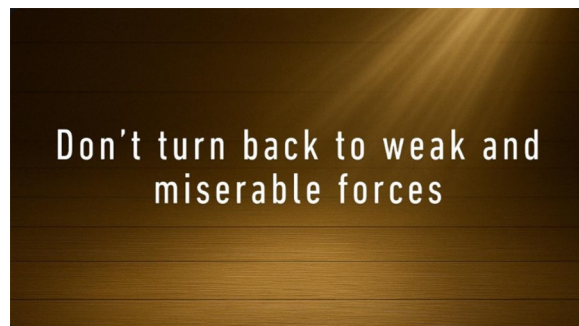
This is the Lord that you have experienced.

This is the God who's giving you life.

Don't turn away to worthless things.

But I want you to notice what Paul describes as the **"weak and miserable forces"** -- or, as the ESV version -- the English Standard Version -- puts it: **"the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world"** -- **that we are prone to return to.**

He doesn't describe the irreligious pursuits of this world, our flesh, and the devil. It's not the obvious sins of addictions, or immorality, or ungodliness. He doesn't say, "Oh, you're turning away from God and you're going back into these kinds of behaviors -- addictions, immorality, ungodliness -- all the different ways in which people would say, 'Oh yeah, yeah, terrible things.'"



He says instead -- and **he's warning us not to return to the religious activities** of observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. In other words, what Paul is saying is -- **don't return to keeping the law, to merit your salvation.** That's a very important statement. And it's one that is the theme of this entire epistle:

Don't think that you are saved by keeping the law -- by being good.

You can never be good enough. By doing what you think the Lord is telling you, so that you can appease a god -- Nope -- you'll never be able to keep those things perfectly. He says, **"Don't think that by returning to rituals, or repetitions, or other kinds of things that would be there from your past -- don't think that by doing that, you can somehow control God."**

No. He says you need to be coming to the Lord in faith -- not by the law.

Now, we tend to think of what he's describing when he says "miserable forces" and all that -- we tend to think of **implicit or explicit idolatry**, when we think of **ungodly forces**. We say, "Oh, that's what he's meaning." But the word of God is telling us that **anything that is not of faith in the Lord's grace and mercy is ungodly.**

★ **It is our self-righteousness that separates us from God.**

★ **It is when we depend on the righteousness of God, that we're actually saved.**

And so Paul's second plea (after he makes this first plea: "Don't go back to all this other stuff. Stay in the grace and the mercy of the Lord Jesus.") His second plea is:

2. Become like me.

In verse twelve, where Paul says, "Become like me," that's best understood when comparing it to Paul's statement in **1 Corinthians 11:1**, where he says, "Follow (or imitate) me as I follow (or imitate) Christ."

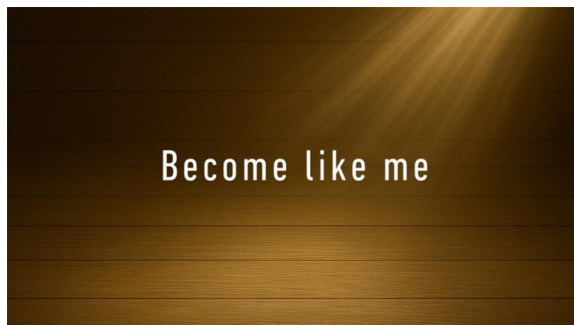
1Co 11:1 Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

It's not just "Do whatever I want -- do whatever I'm doing." **Paul is certainly not asking anyone to be like him according to the flesh.** He's saying that we are to emulate him **inasmuch as he conforms to the image of Christ** -- inasmuch as he successfully imitates and resembles Christ.

This is where we've got to pay attention -- or that is what he's calling our attention to, drawing our attention to. He's saying, "Become like me." But in which way? **Become like me in the ways in which I am becoming like Christ.** Look at this -- look at this example.

And this is where the understanding of the levels of various discipleship maturities and the consistency of spiritual disciplines comes in. I need to look to my brothers and my sisters to see how they are imitating Christ in each and every area of their lives. And they need to look to me -- and they can look to me -- to see how I'm doing the same. And as we do that -- one with another -- we realize, we recognize that **each of us have relative strengths and weaknesses.**

And one area that I may be strong in, you may be weak in. Another area that you are strong in, I am weak in. And so I'm able to learn from your example. I'm able to say, "Oh, I see that you do this really well. I see that you pray in these ways. I see that you meditate on the word of God and apply the word of God in these ways. I



see that you live a life of integrity in these ways. I see that you are diligent in these ways.” That’s something that I would want to emulate.

And the person -- your brother, your sister -- is able to look at you and say, “I see how you praise the Lord and worship Him freely. I see that how you have an intimacy of relationship with the Lord.” And they are able to look at your life and say, “There’s something there that I want to emulate.”

And we’re able to -- one with another, in the local church, having that need for the local body -- **build one another up**. We are able to learn from and encourage each other to keep maturing in each and every area of our lives. Because if we were isolated, we would grow only in those things that we personally paid attention to. And even if we came together with everybody else who was just like me, then I will still only pay attention to those areas that we have in common, as such.

But praise God that he puts us in a body of Christ -- or in the body -- with people:

- who are completely different than us,
- who have different backgrounds,
- who’ve gone through all sorts of different situations,
- who have experienced the Lord Jesus in different ways.

And because of that, they are able to speak into our lives, and we’re able to speak into their lives. That’s why the Lord calls us into the local church.

It is noteworthy -- it’s interesting here -- that immediately after Paul tells the Galatians to be like him, **he reminds them that he first encountered them because of an illness**.

What do we want when we want to associate with somebody else?

We want them to be their best, and we want ourselves to be the best. We don’t say, “I want to associate with you because of your illness.” We want to say, “I want to associate with you because you’ve got it going. You’ve got everything figured out and you’ve got plenty of resources, and you seem to be crushing it.”

No -- he says, “Be like me. And I got to know you because of my illness.”

In fact, the way that -- as you would read these accounts -- it was probably an interruption. It would seem that it wasn’t even that he was originally planning to come to this area in Galatia and minister to these people. But because of his illness, he came into contact with these believers -- or with these folks -- and shares with them.

And Paul says -- and **Paul’s illness, he says, was a trial, a difficulty of some kind that may have caused others to react with contempt and scorn. He says to the Galatians, “Thank you that you didn’t react that way,”** but -- which means that others could possibly have reacted that way.

And if you think about it, maybe others were mocking him. They were saying, “How is it that a mighty apostle like you is sick? We have heard that unusual miracles occurred through your ministry. Why haven’t you healed yourself?” So maybe he was being scorned and mocked and being told, “You’re a hypocrite, Paul. You’re talking about healing and your ministry is taking place, but here you are -- you’re ill.” **That’s the way that the world will tend to deal with us -- to deal with all these kinds of situations.** And Paul says, “I came to you because of this kind of a situation -- but become like me.”

Whatever the details of the illness and the potential to be mistreated because of it, **the Galatians had dealt kindly with Paul**. They welcomed him, received his message, and blessed him. And there was a depth of

relationship -- there was mutual love and care -- that Paul appealed to, when he sought to correct them. Paul is able to say... because they know how he was amongst them.

So, we wouldn't think -- we don't want to think -- that imitating Paul means that we may also have to undergo shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonments, afflictions, illnesses, and disagreements with those we sacrificed everything for. But yes -- that's all possible. When we're called to imitate Paul, we're not to be intimidated or dissuaded by what he suffered for the sake of the gospel.

Our call is to imitate Paul's

- conviction,
- commitment,
- perseverance,
- obedience,
- faithfulness, and
- godly love --
- even for those who opposed him --
- just as Jesus did.

Our call is to imitate Paul, as he imitated Jesus.

And so Paul's third plea to the Galatians is:

3. Be zealous for a good purpose.

Zeal -- fervency, passion, focused interest, engaged participation -- all of that has to be directed toward the right objective, for the right purpose.

You can be zealous about a whole bunch of things. You can be passionate about your hobby, and about going cross-country ATVing, or whatever it may be. You can have a great zeal for whatever captivates you -- whatever grips your heart. But our zeal -- or the zeal that we instill in others -- can't be self-centered, seeking our glory and good.


Instead, our zeal must be, for ourselves and others, to have Christ formed in them.

Our zeal -- you know, our tendency, our desires, passions -- are to see people flourishing in terms of the material things. We say, "Oh, got a good job, have a house, family, all these kinds of material things," and we say, "Oh, here's how you can do that. And I just got a good stock tip, and I can tell you about this, and I can connect you with the person." What is our zeal primarily related to when we deal with people? For all the things of this world.

And it's not that we don't need the things of this world -- and we need help many times, and we ask for help from others, and thank God that we have all of that -- but our greatest zeal, for ourselves and for one another, should be to see Christ formed in the other person, **to see that person knowing and living for Christ.**

And the implication here, in terms of being zealous for the right purpose, is that we are

- studying the word of God,
- praying,



Be zealous for a good purpose

- being filled with the Holy Spirit,
- crucifying the flesh, and
- living in Christ
- so that we can discern the Lord's good purposes.

What is the good purpose that is necessary for you to pursue in this season of your life?

- How will you know that?
- How will you know if this is what the Lord wants me to do?
- How will you know what decision to take?
- How will you know where to go, and who to talk to, and what to do?
- How will you do that?

If you have to have a zeal and a passion to do the right thing -- the good purpose, the right objective -- **you need to spend time with the Lord** -- in prayer, and study, and listening to him, and fellowshiping, and seeking counsel, and doing all that. **There are no shortcuts. That you would do this diligently and consistently**, so that we say,

“Lord God, help me to hear from you so that I can be obedient to you -- to pursue what you want me to pursue.”

That's what gives purpose, meaning, and value in our lives.

We were talking about this in the men's fellowship yesterday -- what is the way that we would have meaning and purpose? Only when we know that this is the objective, this is the purpose the Lord is calling us to.

So that's what Paul says. He says, “Be zealous. Be full of zeal. Have passion. Have that fervency -- for the right, for the good, for the godly purposes.”

So all of Paul's pleas for the Galatians -- and for us -- are summarized in this point of application:


We must respond and apply the word of God we have heard by speaking the truth -- only in intense, sincere, Spirit-led agape love -- the love of God, so that Christ is formed in the hearer.

We must speak the truth in love, but we're not speaking the truth in love for any other reason than for Christ to be formed in the hearer.

Six years ago, when we studied Ephesians chapter four -- and particularly **Ephesians 4:15** -- we learned that **speaking the truth in love has to do with delivering God's message for the benefit of the hearer.**

Whatever we say must be based on:

- a deep relationship, couched in affirmation --
- sincerely encouraging, correcting, but not cutting.
- Personal, not public.
- Not driven by or censored by fear.
- And eager to build up, not tear down.



**We respond and apply by
speaking the truth only in love**

That means that sometimes we don't say everything we *could* say. We don't blurt out everything we're thinking. And sometimes we *do* say what we don't want to say. We're like, "Oh, I don't know if I should say that. I don't know how they'll receive it." **But we obey God and rely on His grace to communicate His message in love.**

And in both instances -- whether we are saying what we didn't really want to say, but the Lord is prompting us to do that -- or we don't say even what we're thinking because the Lord is telling us not to say that -- **in both instances, we must be led by the Holy Spirit, like Jesus, to only say what we hear the Father say.**

- Jesus said, "I don't say anything until I hear the Father say it."
- I don't do anything until I see the Father do it."

That's **remarkable dependence**, and **remarkable discipline – constrained -- just the connection with the Lord**, in that sense.

Our purpose in speaking the truth in love is so that:

- ★ everything that hinders growth can be removed, and
- ★ everything that fosters growth can be strengthened.

That's what we're doing when we speak to one another in that way. That's what we're doing when we say,

"Let me tell you the word of God that applies to your situation. Let me encourage you with what the Lord has done. Let me testify of how He has been a God of answers, and comfort, and peace in my life."

And when we do that, we're saying, "I'm going to tell you the truth in love. This path that you're on is not good. It's not life-giving. I want to tell you of how the Lord can bring you into the path of life and truth." But when I do that, and I speak in love, **it is so that those things that are harmful to you in your life, are removed, and those things that are life-giving for you, are strengthened.** That's the desire that we have for one another.

And so, as uncomfortable as it may have been, Paul spoke the truth to the Galatians to the extent that he stood in danger of becoming their enemy. He says, "Am I now becoming an enemy to you because I spoke the truth?"

But here's the critical difference -- and this is a point that we have made previously or previously recognized in the ministry of Paul -- **he spoke the truth in love, and he modeled the truth he challenged them too.**

Paul's entire focus was that, **in Christ being formed in us, we would become like Christ --**

- in character,
- attitude, and
- behavior --
- through surrender,
- sacrifice, and
- faith.

Paul stated in **2 Corinthians 3:17-18:**

2Co 3:17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

2Co 3:18 And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate (or reflect) the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Transformation is by the Spirit -- not our efforts.

It requires our surrender -- not our control. It is present continuous -- we are *being* transformed. It is present continuous for our whole lives -- not just for a short period, or a brief season.

It is by the renewing of our minds -- when our pasts are dealt with, we are obedient in the present, and we face the future with hope, not fear. It is then that this transformation of the Lord is at work in us.

Transformation takes place in a community -- where we rub up against each other and learn to prefer others over ourselves. **The result of our being transformed into the image of Christ is that we will reflect the ever-increasing glory of God -- not self -- in ways that are evident to all.**

Oh, what a joy! What a glorious truth! What a reality!

Isn't this something that we can aspire to live to -- or live for?

We don't live in this world hopeless and wandering and aimless. We say,

"Lord, this is something that is worth living for -- that I would have Christ formed in me, that I would have this kind of joy, that I would reflect the glory of God and the image of Christ, and that when others look at me, they would not see me -- they would see Jesus. They would also be encouraged to have Christ formed in them."

And as we continue to be transformed into the image of Christ, as Christ continues to be formed in us, we can declare like Paul did in **Galatians 2:19-20**:

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

Gal 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

This morning -- if you don't know what that means, if you haven't experienced this truth, this reality -- that you could be crucified with Christ, and that the life you now live is no longer in the flesh, in the body, according to your thinking -- but rather, you can have new life in Christ Jesus -- that He would take and make something new of your life -- then I want to encourage you: that today be the day that you would say,

"Lord, I submit to you. I yield to you. I receive this truth. I understand that you have a truth and a life that is available for me that nothing else can provide."

And if you will make that commitment to say,

"Lord God, I accept this truth. I receive your word. And I want to live according to this word."

The promise of the word of God is that that simple declaration, that simple submission, that simple confession is sufficient for the Lord to respond -- **for the Lord to say, "I take you, and I adopt you. I bring you to myself as my child, and I will care for you, and I will be a Father to you."**

That is a remarkable reality that we have in Christ Jesus.

But if you are a child of God -- if you understood what Paul declares here in Galatians, and he says, “I have been crucified with Christ, and the life I live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” -- if that is you, then I want to encourage you -- I want to challenge you -- that you don’t stop there. That you don’t simply say, “Well, I’m saved. I’m good. The Lord has rescued me. The Lord has given me life. That’s enough.”

No. **My challenge to you would be that you pray and that you commit to see Christ formed in you** -- regularly, completely, ongoing -- so that you would say,

“Lord, every single day, in every way -- Lord God, let me reflect Christ. You be formed in me. Lord, let me decrease, and you increase. Let me be submitted to the will and the power of the Holy Spirit -- of the Lord God Almighty -- so that my life would reflect that reality.”

Oh, our goal -- our wish, our desire -- is that every one of us, ourselves and every one of the people that we interact with, that in all of us, **we would persevere. We would stick to the Lord. We would cling to Him until Christ is formed in us.**

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that, Lord, we have this wonderful truth in your word. And Lord, we are not seeking for the things of this world to be formed in us. We’re not seeking for fame and fortune. Lord, we’re not asking for recognition and all sorts of other rewards in this world.

But no, Lord -- instead, we want Christ to be formed in us.

We want to know you as our Lord and Savior. We want to accept you and take that first step of saying, “I believe.” And as I believe, I confess -- I accept the Lord Jesus.

And then, Lord, as we do that -- as we take that step -- I pray, Father, that we will continue to be transformed into your likeness every single day. We would die to self and be raised up to new life in Christ Jesus. That, Lord, even as Paul says here, that there will be that new birth reality every day for us -- because we are your children, because you’ve called us to new life, because you have blessed us in these ways. We are so grateful, Lord. We thank you.

Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for your truth. We pray that you -- not by our strength, but by your strength, by your Holy Spirit -- would cause us, Lord, to live according to your word now.

In Jesus’ name we pray – Amen.
