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Galatians 4:8-20

That Christ May Be Formed in You

In 2 Corinthians 11:23-28, Paul gives a long list of all these ways he has suffered in his gospel ministry. Paul's list of trials and sufferings is humbling: he endured many imprisonments, "countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger of rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers" (2 Cor. 11:23-26). I don't know about you, but I've never endured anything like this long list of trials and sufferings! I've never been imprisoned, never beaten for the gospel, never shipwrecked or adrift at sea, never threatened by robbers. If any *one* of those things happened to me, it would instantly become both the most interesting and worst thing to happen to me. Needless to say, it's an impressive list. And then, at the end of it, Paul says something quite astonishing: he says, "And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches" (v.28)

It's as if Paul is saying, on top of *all of this* - over and against his beatings, imprisonments, and shipwrecks - the most taxing, challenging trial Paul endured for the sake of the gospel was his *anxiety for all the churches*. That floors me every time I think of it! What does he mean by saying that his anxiety for the churches is a greater labor, a more difficult trial, than being imprisoned, beaten, shipwrecked, or to have your physical life in danger? How can Paul say that? It's because of how much Paul loved the church; of how much he loved each and every single individual he shared the gospel with and who professed faith in Christ! He *earnestly desired their salvation; he earnestly desired for them to persevere and grow in the faith of Christ Jesus!*

I've only been a pastor for about a year and a half now, and while I don't claim to be able to relate to the experiences of Paul or to be able to boast as much of a heart of love as he can, I will say that after being a pastor for even a little while, I think I understand what Paul means here at least a *little more*. You see, I *love the church*. And I don't mean the building, or the organization itself - I mean the people; I *love you guys!* I earnestly desire and yearn for your

spiritual good and salvation! To see each person persevere in the faith and not fall away! To see each person continue to grow in spiritual maturity and to bear the fruit of a genuine faith! I have an enormous privilege of getting a front row seat to many of the wonderful signs of faith and spiritual growth going on in our church and in your lives, and it fills my heart with overwhelming joy!

But the opposite is also true. I also often have a front row seat to when things *aren't* going well. It means my heart is often *burdened* with concern, even anguish at times, when people don't seem to be responding in faith, but seem to be hardening their hearts. There have been moments when I have been overwhelmed with a sense of anguish and concern over peoples' spiritual condition, being concerned that they are not growing in Christ, but walking away from Him; not persevering in the faith, but turning back to patterns of unrepentant sin, legalism, and unbelief. Some of the most difficult moments in my entire life have been watching people turn away from the truth of the gospel, tell me they don't believe the same gospel that I do, and walk away from the church. That breaks my heart. That motivates me to desire, pray, labor, and work towards seeing each person persevere and grow in faith in the gospel of Christ! It makes me want to work even harder, to do whatever necessary, to labor in love for the spiritual good of each of you!

I think this is a glimpse of what Paul meant when he said that, above all his other sufferings and trials, was his "daily pressure" and "anxiety for all the churches." I think it's a glimpse into Paul's heart: a pastor's heart of earnest love for people, earnestly desiring their faith to prove genuine, for them to persevere and grow in Christ, that they would be saved! And it's exactly *this* pastoral heart of Paul that drives his letter to the Galatians - and I think one of the clearest examples of this is here in our passage this morning, Gal. 4:8-20. John Stott, who was a faithful pastor and theologian in England in the twentieth century, says this in his commentary on this passage:

"If in our study thus far we have thought of Paul merely as a scholar with massive intellectual powers, all head and no heart, this paragraph will correct our first impression. For here Paul appeals to the Galatians with deep feeling and immense tenderness... He even goes on to liken himself to their mother, who is 'in labor' over them until Christ is formed in them. In Galatians 1-3, we have been listening to Paul the apostle, Paul the theologian, Paul the defender

of the faith; but now, we are hearing Paul the man, Paul the pastor, Paul the passionate love of souls.”¹

That’s what’s going on in this passage. We see the pastoral heart of Paul pleading with Christians he loves, driven by concern for their spiritual state. And here’s the thing: *this kind of heart and love is not just meant for pastors!* This should be the heart and concern of *every Christian, every church member!* This should be *our heart*, for each one of us, driving our love and concern *for each other!* So I want that to frame the way we look at this passage this morning. First, we’ll see *why* it is so urgent that we all persevere in knowing God through faith, as Sons, and do not turn back to slavery. Then, we’ll see *how* this should drive us in our love and concern for each other: that we should desire and pursue each others’ spiritual growth and perseverance in faith in Christ.

So first, Paul tells us *why* we need to have such concern for each others’ souls:

I. If You Go Back to Slavery, then You Do Not Truly Know God and Will Not be Saved (4:8-11)

Paul begins, in verses 8-9, by contrasting the Galatians’ lives *before* faith in Christ and *after* their faith in Christ. “Formerly, when you did not know GOD, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather be known by God...” Paul is reminding the Galatians what their lives of *slavery* looked like before Christ: they were *pagans*, They were enslaved to idols, false gods - “those that by nature are not gods.”

Such paganism and idolatry was rampant in that day and age. We may be tempted to think that this isn’t true of Western civilization, like modern day America, but idolatry is just as strong today as it was for the ancient Greek pagans. Mankind is still just as sinful; we’re still just as prone to worship idols, to be “enslaved to those that by nature are not gods,” whether it be money, power, fame and glory, praise of man, sexual immorality, comfort and pleasure, science and reason, politics, our own self, etc. Paul is reminding us, just as much as he was the Galatians, that before Christ, we were all *enslaved* to lifestyles of sinfulness and idolatry.

But then, Paul reminds us - everything changed! We became Christians! We believed that Christ lived a perfect life in our place, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again on the third day, so that we might be raised to eternal life with God! “But now,” Paul reminds us, we have “come to know God.” We are God’s sons; we know God personally in Christ Jesus! But then,

¹ John Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (“The Bible Speaks Today” series), p. 111.

Paul immediately qualifies his statement, saying that what's even *more* accurate, what's even *more* important, is that we are "known *by* God." We love God because he first loved us. We *know* God because He has first chosen to know us, drawing us into a personal relationship with Him through the power of the gospel!

This is a powerful, beautiful reminder of what happens in our conversion - of what truly happens when someone becomes a believer, a real Christian! To become a Christian is to *repent and believe* - to reject our old ways of thinking and living, to leave behind the life of the slave, and to enter a new life, a life of faith in Jesus Christ, a life as a *son of God!* A life of freedom in the gospel! This means that our lives will *necessarily be different* after we become Christians than they were *before* we became Christians. The Galatians *were* enslaved to false gods; now they are not, they know God in Christ and are known by God! They are sons of God through faith! And so it must be with us. So the question for all of us today is: does your life look different now than it did before you became a believer? I don't mean *perfect*. None of us will be perfect until Heaven. But does your life look like that of a son of God now? Or does your life still look the same - like that of a slave, as one enslaved to sin, the world, and false beliefs? If your life looks absolutely no different from that of non-believers that you know, than *you might not truly know God!* After reminding the Galatians of their conversion, of their past slavery, and of their present status as those who know and are known by God as sons, he then issues a warning. And he does so in the form of an astonished rhetorical question, in the rest of verse 9: "how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?" In other words: you professed faith in the gospel! YOU know God! YOU've been set free from slavery to idols in the gospel of Christ! How in the *world* can you go put yourself back into slavery to the "weak and worthless elementary principles of the world?" Paul is absolutely *astonished* that they are wanting to return to slavery!

Now, at this point, we might expect Paul to charge them with trying to go back to worshipping false Greek gods, back to their pagan roots - but he actually says something very different next! We learn what new form of slavery they're seeking in v.10: "You observe days and months and seasons and years!" This is most likely a reference to observing the special days and festivals of the Mosaic Law - such as Sabbath "days" and festival "weeks" and New Moon observances every "month" and Sabbatical "years." Again, Paul wrote this letter because false teachers, the Judaizers, had come to the Galatian churches, telling them that in order to truly be

saved, they need Jesus *plus* works of the Law: that they needed to become good Jews, obey the Law of Moses, get circumcised, only eat kosher foods, start observing the Sabbath and other special days and festivals of the Mosaic Law. In other words, what Paul is saying here is really quite remarkable: he's saying that by trying to put themselves under the Law of Moses - by basing part of their righteousness before God on their own works of obedience and observance of the Law - they are actually *going back to slavery!* Paul is saying that these Galatian believers trying to put themselves under the Law is *just as bad* as if they were turning from Christ and going back to worship Zeus and other fake gods! To go back to the Law (a lifestyle of legalism) would be just as bad as going back to their worthless idols (a lifestyle of paganism). Neither one is Christian! Paul is warning them that if they put themselves under the Law, seeking their justification from obeying the Law, then they are actually *turning away* from Christ, no longer believing the gospel! And if they do this, if they go back to slavery, then they are proving that they are *not truly Christians* and will not be saved! Verse 11 makes this very clear: "I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain." Paul's concern is that, if they put themselves back into slavery under the Law, Paul's labors among the Galatians in gospel ministry, and even their apparent responses of faith, will prove to have been "in vain" by showing that they are not truly believers since they aren't trusting in Christ alone but are also trusting in the works of the Law.

We all know that turning away from Christ to go back to worshipping Zeus is wrong, revealing that someone isn't a believer. The shocking thing that Paul is saying here is: *it is just as wrong and damnable for someone to turn back and put themselves under the Law of Moses as part of their salvation!* Imagine someone came to our church and became a Christian, converting from their former beliefs as a Muslim or Hindu. But then, a few years later, they sadly turn back to their Muslim or Hindu faith, to go back and worship false gods. All of us would, without a doubt, be alarmed and distressed over this individual's soul! We would be anguishing over them, concerned for their salvation, pleading with them to turn back to Christ and have faith in the gospel of Christ! But now imagine a man in our church who becomes a believer, turning away from a non-religious, secular life. Before Christ, he didn't consider himself very religious; but he did consider himself a good person. He rooted his identity, value, and justification in being a hard-worker, doing well at his job, being his own version of what it meant to be a good person, a decent husband, father, son, etc. If a few years later, he started to go back to his old ways of thinking - of basing his identity and justification on what he does, thinking he is really a good

person and doesn't need to change how he thinks or lives - would we be just as concerned for him as the man turning back to Islam or Hinduism? What Paul is telling us here is: we should be!

Brothers and sisters, *we don't have the option to go back to slavery to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world!* Now, there are many ways we may be tempted to do this. You may be tempted to turn back to lifestyles of explicit, unrepentant sin, like before you were a Christian; you may be tempted to be enslaved to patterns of sin, to enslave yourself to the gods of lust and sexuality, to pride and self, to money and materialism, to work, to the praise of men, to power and fame and glory, to comfort and pleasure. If you find yourself tempted, or have already begun to put yourself back into slavery: *please here my plea! Don't go back to slavery! Turn to Christ in faith! Keep repenting and believing the gospel!* Because if you go back to slavery, then you can no longer consider yourself a son of God.

But there are other, more subtle ways for us to be tempted back to slavery. Many of us are tempted to enslave ourselves to legalism - to become slaves of the Law, thinking that our righteousness and standing before God is based on our own works and obedience in any way! Perhaps you're tempted to make the Christians a checklist: I have to do, do that, read my Bible so often, pray so often, go to church, give so much, don't this, don't do that, and *then* God will love me! *Then* I'll really be a Christian! But brothers and sisters - that's *just as bad* as going out and worshiping fake gods! That is not the path to Christ, it is *slavery!* So let us *keep looking to Christ and believing the gospel!* Let us firmly believe that we know God as His Sons, that we are righteous and saved, *purely by grace through faith in Christ*, and nothing else!

And it's not enough that we should remember this for ourselves - we must *earnestly help each other believe and walk in the gospel as well!*

II. We Must Earnestly Labor for One Another to Persevere and Grow in Christ (4:12-14)

Paul has made it very clear: *their very salvation is on the line!* Therefore, Paul gives a passionate, urgent plea, in v.12 "Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are." Paul, though a Jew, has "become as [the Galatians] are" because he no longer lives as one under the Law - he lives as one under Christ! And so, he entreats them to live not as slaves but in the freedom of the gospel! In verses 12-20, we see a series of emotional appeals Paul makes, drawing on their relationship and mutual love for one another, pleading them to not be led astray into slavery by false teachings, but to instead persevere in faith in Christ! As I said

earlier, this concern Paul has for their spiritual well-being should be the same concern that *we have* for each other, as fellow Christians, as fellow church members. When we join a local church, we are making a covenantal commitment to one another to *care for one another's spiritual well-being, growth, and salvation!* Therefore, I want us to look at what Paul says here as a *model* for how *we* are to love one another as a church.

First, we see that:

1. *We must love each other enough to proclaim the truth to others, regardless of how they will respond (4:12b-16)*

Paul reminds the Galatians of their past love towards Paul for preaching the gospel in vv.12b-14: “You did me no wrong. 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.” When Paul first came to them, preaching the gospel, he did so because of a “bodily ailment,” some kind of sickness. We don't know what kind of ailment (possibly something to do with his eyes); but either way, it was a trial for the Galatians who listen to him proclaim the gospel. And yet, *they loved him!* They received him warmly, as they would an angel, even Christ! Why? *Because they loved him dearly for bringing them the truth of the gospel to them, that they might know God and be saved through faith!*

We should be a people who *love* to have the truth of God's Word, especially the truth of the gospel, proclaimed to us and applied to our lives! And if we truly care about our *own* souls and are concerned for our own salvation and spiritual growth, then we should *delight* when others speak the gospel into our lives; we should *love* one another for proclaiming the truth to us, even when that requires that they correct us, or rebuke us, or warn and exhort us from falling back into patterns of slavery!

But unfortunately, people don't always respond well when the truth is proclaimed to them. In fact, by the time Paul writes this letter, things with the Galatians had changed. VV.15-16 say: “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. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?” Whereas they first loved him for telling them the truth, now he proclaims the truth they *regard him as an enemy*. He proclaims the truth of the gospel, exhorting them to continue to believe the gospel and walk in light of it, urging them not to become slaves to false teachings of

legalism and abandon Christ! He does it because he loves them and is concerned for their souls, for their salvation!

We, too, are called to *proclaim the gospel* to each other and *exhort one another* to walk by faith in the gospel, not to go back to slavery to the ways of the world, of sin, idolatry, and legalism. The only way we'll do this well is if we're *driven by love for one another*; if we're driven by sincere *care and concern for one another's souls*! We must love one another enough to proclaim the truth of the gospel to each other, even when that requires words of rebuke, warning, and exhortation! Even if the other person might get upset or mad at us! If we truly love someone, then what does it matter if they get upset with us, if their very soul, if their eternal salvation, is at stake? Who cares if someone doesn't like it! Who cares if they get upset with you, or think you're their enemy! What's more important is that you proclaim the truth of the gospel to them and call them to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. That's what love demands.

Similarly...

2. *We Must Love Each Other Enough to Guard One Another from False Teachers (4:18)*

VV.17-18 say, "They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you" These false teachers wanted to cut the Christians off from Paul, to not trust him, and so follow them. But Paul warns them: it's not because the false teachers care about the Galatians! It's because of pride - they want the Galatians to think highly and make much of *them*. But Paul is not like these false teachers - he genuinely cares about the Galatians! So he fights for their faith, warning them against false teachings.

We must do the same. We must guard one another from false teachings. We must warn each other from falling into wrong beliefs, into wrong doctrines and false teachings, but being led astray and influenced by false teachers. Sometimes this means having hard conversations with our loved ones, warning them about friends who claim to be Christians but don't believe the true gospel, who reject God's Word, and embrace false teachings. But love demands that we stand in the truth. And this is because...

3. *We Must Earnestly Labor to See Christ Formed in Each Others' Lives (4:18-20)*

Paul's appeal culminates in verses 19-20, revealing the deep love he has for Galatians: "my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you."

Paul entreats, exhorts, warns, and pleads with them because he *loves them!* Because he is concerned for the state of their souls! Because he yearns for them to persevere in the faith, to not fall away, so that their faith would prove genuine, so that they will be saved! He entreats them urgently, calling them “little children” in verse 19, saying that he is so concerned for the state of their souls that he feels like he is in labor, in the “anguish of childbirth”! And his goal in laboring is this: that “Christ is formed in you!” Paul yearns for their faith to prove genuine - just as much now as he did when he first preached the gospel to them! He yearns for them to continue in the faith. He yearns for them to grow in Christ, becoming more like Christ - that Christ would be formed in their lives in every way! Paul desperately, passionately, desires and pursues their spiritual good, growth, and perseverance in Christ through faith!

Like Paul, we must love each other enough to desire and pursue each other’s spiritual well-being; we must preach the gospel to each other, and exhort one another to persevere in faith in the gospel of Christ. We need to care *just as much* for each others’ souls as Paul cares for the Galatians; we need to truly, earnestly desire to see one another have *true, lasting, fruitful faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ!* And if we see signs of backsliding, signs of walking away, signs of going back to slavery in one of our brothers and sisters, then we should *all* be filled the same concern, the same care, the same *agonizing anguish* that Paul expresses here! Our love should drive and motivate us to pursue one another’s spiritual good, to see each other continue in repentant faith, to persevere in Christ! We should yearn to see “Christ formed” in each person! We should do everything necessary to *pursue* this end - to work towards Christ being formed in each person! All of us must labor to see each other grow in Christ, to persevere in faith in Christ and not fall back into slavery to sin, the world, to Satan, or to a spirit of legalism or any other false, anti-gospel lifestyle!

I desire, I pray and pursue, for Christ to be formed *in each one of you* this morning! Perhaps you’re a member of our church: brothers and sisters, I love you so much! Let us continue in the faith! Let us not go back to slavery, but let us grow and persevere in Christ! Let us *love and care for each others’ souls* so much that we *pursue one another’s spiritual growth, maturity, and well-being*, no matter what it takes!

Perhaps you’re a believer visiting with us today. I desire and plea for you to grow in Christ in every way! If you’re not a member of a church body, then my plea with you today is that you would unite yourself to a church body that believes this gospel of Christ and that is

committed to seeing one another persevere in the faith and grow in Christ! I plea with you this morning to unite yourself to the community of the gospel, making a commitment to pursue the spiritual maturity and perseverance of the specific members of the local church! And also making the commitment that you will *allow* your brothers and sisters to speak the gospel into your life, *especially when you're not walking in the gospel*, so that you may persevere in the faith, grow in Christ, and your faith prove genuine!

This is my earnest desire, my prayer and pursuit, for all of our children, that they would grow to know the Lord and be saved through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ!

And perhaps today you're not a Christian, or you're not sure if you are or not. Perhaps your life does not look like that of a child of God; perhaps you're living as one enslaved in sin, enslaved to idolatry, false beliefs, or the ways of the world. Perhaps you're enslaved to the ways of legalism and works-based righteousness. If that's you this morning, then *I earnestly plead with you, turn away from slavery and turn to Christ!* Repent and believe in the gospel: trust that Jesus Christ lived a perfect life, died on the cross for your sins, and rose again, doing everything necessary for you to be forgiven, to be saved from your sins, to be declared righteous before God, and be raised to eternal life! This salvation can be yours, simply by grace through faith in Jesus Christ! Simply believe, and profess your faith in baptism!

If you have any questions about this gospel, or about baptism, or church membership, please come and let me know! Let us pray.