

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Galatians		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	23		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Galatians 4:8-20		
Date:	August 16, 2026 (a.m.)		

PAUL'S PLEA

Galatians is, without a doubt, the Apostle Paul's most impassioned epistle. His emotional language runs from beginning to end. In 1:9 he exclaims: "If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!" In 2:11-16 he airs his emotions when he publicly rebuked the Apostle Peter. Chapter 3 begins with the thundering words, "You foolish Galatians!" But Paul's language also reveals that he is intensely concerned with the spiritual welfare of the Galatians, and 4:8-20 shows us that the Apostle Paul was not impersonal and detached in his approach to sound doctrine. Yes, he has, and he will continue to argue his case in a meticulous fashion, but he is not the least bit interested in simply scoring debating points and winning an argument. This section of Galatians is distinguished by Paul's urgent pastoral concern for the Galatians. John R. W. Stott captures the flow of the epistle when he writes: "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 lover of souls."¹ Paul's pastoral plea stems from his strong desire to see the saints established in grace. It grows out of a love that longs for the well-being of fellow Christians, not merely for their happiness, but for their holiness and wholeness in the truths of the gospel of grace. Thomas Schreiner makes this important observation, "We see another instance of the social implications of the gospel in Galatians 4:12-20. The text is fascinating because it is deeply personal and relational. Paul hasn't forgotten about the truth of the gospel, and he exhorts the Galatians to remain faithful by reminding them of his friendship with them. He recalls *the good old days* when he first proclaimed the gospel to them and they received Paul *as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus* (4:14). Indeed, their love for Paul was so intense that they were even willing, so to speak, to gouge out their eyes for his sake. Their warm reception of Paul was even more remarkable because he was afflicted with some kind of sickness, and Paul's illness could have been so repulsive that they would refuse to accept him. The warm memories of the past, however, were in danger of being erased with the arrival of the agitators. Apparently, Paul's insistence on *telling you the truth* (4:16), the truth of the gospel, imperiled their friendship. Paul can't imagine, however, any friendship that isn't built on the truth. The Jewish teachers were waving an olive branch before the Galatians, but the motive of these teachers was suspect. They weren't passionate for the truth of the gospel. Instead, they were narcissistic and self-obsessed. They wanted the friendship of the Galatians for their own sake, for their own reputation, for their own egos. Paul longed to be friends with the Galatians for their benefit and for the sake of the gospel. The Jewish teachers pretended to be friends, but they were actually only concerned about themselves. Paul's desire, on the other hand, was not that he would be exalted but that Christ would be formed in them (4:19)."²

- I. **THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE PLEA (verses 8-11).** In this section Paul halts his argumentation momentarily and calls the Galatians to stop and consider their past history.
 - A. **Their Past Bondage.** They were steeped in paganism and religious ignorance. They were *enslaved* by a slavish fear and worship of what Paul calls "godless gods."³ (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:5; 10:22).
 - B. **Their Present Attitude.** In light of their past bondage, the Apostle now asks them why in the world would they want to *revert* back? Why turn from the riches of the gospel of grace to a religious system that in essence is no different from paganism?⁴ The Galatians, under the influence of the

Judaizers, were now *observing*⁵ the Jewish religious calendar. Why adopt these weak and miserable principles? They are *weak* because they have no power to save or justify and they are *miserable* because they bring only enslavement. Guthries has aptly stated, “There can be no denying that [Paul] classes all other religious systems outside Christianity as *weak and beggarly*. To him Christ is the only means of coming to a true knowledge of God.”⁶

- C. ***The Apostle’s Concern.*** The Galatians are on the verge of adopting a legalistic system, and if that occurs, then Paul’s preaching among them would amount to nothing. Such is the fatal character of legalism.

II. ***THE CONTENT OF THE PLEA (verses 12-15).*** The Apostle lays open his heart. For the time being he drops his doctrinal argumentation and makes a personal appeal to his Galatian converts.

- A. ***Follow Paul’s Pattern.*** The Apostle calls upon the Galatians to mimic him in that he *left* his former legalistic position and embraced the Gospel of Christ.
- B. ***Remember Paul’s Preaching.*** He reminds them of the circumstances surrounding his first preaching the gospel among them and how they initially received him.

NOTE: We do not know the nature of the illness that Paul refers to in this passage. Whatever it was, it could have been seen as a burden or a trial to the Galatians. The language Paul uses here may indicate that his particular affliction rendered him repulsive – yet the Galatians did not *loathe*⁷ him but joyfully received him.

- C. ***Remember Your Joy.*** The question of verse 15 is captured well by the NIV. “What has happened to all your joy?” There is an implied contrast in Paul’s words. The Galatians had responded to his preaching with great joy. “They congratulated themselves that this messenger of God had come with such good news.”⁸ But now things have changed. The Judaizers made them have second thoughts about Paul.

NOTE: As long as the Galatians were feeding upon the doctrines of God’s grace, rejoicing in their justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, they were full of joy. But now that they have embraced the legalism of the Judaizers their joy has turned to pride and arrogance – which is always the case when people trust in human merit.

- D. ***Remember Your Love.*** The Galatians not only responded to the Gospel with joy, they manifested a sacrificial spirit towards Paul. Many commentators feel that the allusion to the Galatians plucking out their eyes, if that were possible, and giving them to Paul indicates that the Apostle had some sort of eye problem. H. D. Betz, on the other hand, has convincingly shown that Paul is using a well-known figure of speech that is a literary trope which underscores the nature of true friendship.⁹

III. ***THE CAUSE OF THE PLEA (verses 16-20).*** The Judaizers had portrayed Paul as having a secret agenda and that his gospel was shortchanging the Galatians.

- A. ***Paul’s Truthfulness.*** An Apostle’s authority does not cease when he has to rebuke or correct false teaching! The Galatians were inclined to believe that since Paul is being critical, he is therefore hostile towards them! Telling the truth is sometimes painful. This is especially the case when error is exposed.
- B. ***The Judaizers’ Insincerity.*** They are the ones with the hidden agenda. They are *courting* the Galatians in order to *seduce* them.¹⁰ They desire to have the Galatians completely under their authority and cut off from association with Paul. In other words, they are not the least bit interested in the Galatians’ spiritual well-being. They are concerned only with themselves.

- C. **Paul's Pastoral Concern.** Unlike the Judaizers, Paul agonizes over the Galatians the way a parent would over an erring child. He longs for their maturity in Christ. Note how this is directly linked with holding fast to the doctrines of God's grace. The Apostle expresses deep perplexity over their doctrinal wavering.

CONCLUSION: How important is the *truth* of the Gospel? In Paul's mind it was of supreme importance. "In the Church today," laments J. R. W. Stott, "there is far too little deference to the apostolic word."¹¹ Many pastors are too preoccupied with trying to be relevant and popular. They avoid like the plague anything that might in the least be controversial or they simply play to the gallery by pulpit pounding on themes they know their audience is already inclined to accept. The Church needs, first and foremost, loyalty to the Apostolic message coupled with an Apostolic compassion for the welfare of Christ's flock. My old classmate Phil Ryken rightly said, "The apostle's ultimate goal was to see Christ take shape in the lives of his people, to see Christ *formed* in them. Christ was already starting to take shape in Paul's life. Back at the end of chapter 2 he said, *It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me* (Gal. 2:20). Now he wanted the same Christ to live in the Galatians in the same way. This ought to be the goal of every pastor: not the favor of men, but the formation of Christ. As Calvin observed, *If ministers wish to be something, let them labour to form Christ, not themselves*, in their hearers. This kind of spiritual formation does not happen overnight. It takes a while for an embryo to grow into an infant, and then for a child to grow into an adult. Cell must be added to cell, tissue to tissue, sinew to bone. In the same way, the Spirit gradually uses God's Word to make God's children like God's Son."¹² Along these lines, old Alexander Comrie wisely wrote, "Many do not get beyond this point. Anyone who calmly examines the ways of God with himself and others can affirm this from his own experience. Isaiah 37:3 expresses this: *For the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth*. The Lord speaks of this in Hosea 13:13, saying, *He is an unwise son; for he should not stay long in the place of the breaking forth of children*. As Paul states in Galatians 4:19, ministers must, therefore, labor to bring them to birth."¹³

ENDNOTES

¹ J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (IVP, 1968), p. 111.

² T. R. Schreiner, *Christ Crucified: A Theology of Galatians* (Crossway, 2024), p. 108.

³ The expression *physei theoi* refers to beings who actually are divine by nature as opposed to *thesei theoi* which refers to those that become divine by human positioning. Paul categorically denies that pagan gods have any divine status.

⁴ Note the twice-repeated "again" (KJV and NASB). This is the Greek adverb *palin* and it plainly indicates that as far as the Apostle was concerned, the perverted message of the Judaizers was identical to paganism.

⁵ The word translated "observe" in the NIV is *paraterēisthe* and is very intensive. It indicates a close, scrupulous meticulous observance that was typical of the Pharisees. Cf. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* IV (Broadman, 1935), p. 303.

⁶ D. Guthrie, *Galatians: The New Century Bible Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 117.

⁷ The term translated "contempt or scorn" in the NIV is *ekptuō*, literally meaning to spit out – and came to mean to spurn or hold in contempt. Cf. J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 198.

⁸ F. F. Bruce, *New International Greek Testament Commentary on Galatians* (Eerdmans, 1985), p. 208.

⁹ H. D. Betz, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Fortress, 1972), pp. 225-226.

¹⁰ The word Paul uses indicates dishonorable intentions and is used in other Greek sources to refer to sexual seduction, cf. Betz, op. cit.

¹¹ Stott, p. 118.

¹² P. Ryken, *Galatians: Reformed Expository Commentary* (P&R, 2005), p. 177.

¹³ A. Comrie, *Distinctive Marks of Saving Faith* (RHB, 2024), p. 150.