

THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD'S GRACE PLEADS WITH US TO REMAIN FREE Galatians 4:8-20

Please review this week's catechism question.

Were you able to meet anyone new after church this past Sunday?

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever begged someone for something? What is that experience like? What kinds of emotions are involved? What would motivate you to beg?

In this passage Paul begs the Galatians to become like him (v. 12). He also says that his present emotional state and effort towards them is the same as that of a woman giving birth (v. 19). We have witnessed Paul's passion bubble up throughout the first three chapters of this letter but in this passage his emotional turmoil that is motivated by his love for them and for Christ comes flaring out. However, this is not merely an expression of Paul's emotional condition and zeal for the Galatians but a portrait of God's pursuit of his people. As Paul says in another of his letters, "Therefore, we are Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." Therefore, as we listen to Paul's urgent pleading we are hearing the voice of God pleading with us. God, through his apostle, is speaking to us with warnings and pleadings and criticisms and tenderness so that we will trust in Christ alone and nothing else. In this passage Paul tells us why it is that he (and God through him) wants the Galatians and us to trust in Christ alone.

STUDY

1. In v. 8 what do we find out about the Galatians (at least some of them) prior to Paul's preaching the gospel to them?

Paul addresses specifically the non-Jewish or Gentile Christians in the churches of Galatia. It is these he is most concerned about because they have no reason to obey any of the OT laws and yet that is what they are being told they must do if they are going to be loved and accepted by God. He tells them to remember what their lives were like before he came and preached the gospel to them. They were slaves to gods who are not gods. They worshipped idols made of stone and wood and silver that are nothing but the figment of human imagination. They did not know the living and the true God but they prayed to and sang songs of praise to and wrote poetry about and offered sacrifices to and sought the blessing of gods who did not exist. Paul calls this idolatry slavery.

2. Why does Paul describe idol worship as slavery? What is true of slavery that is also true of idol worship?

Slaves get nothing for their labor. They obey their masters and work but they receive nothing in return for their obedience. They are not justly compensated for their labor. So it is with idolatry. You obey the rules of the false gods and you serve them and invest your time and resources in doing what they say but you get nothing in return. If you were to talk with the adherents of false religions they will say that they receive all sorts of compensation from their deity. However, Paul says all such claims are false claims. The reason is that there is only one true and living God. There is nobody listening to their prayers. Thus, all the worship and work of those in false religions accomplishes nothing but merely increases guilt because they are ignoring the true God and serving imaginary gods. Whatever claims that the adherents of Islam or Hinduism or Taoism or Buddhism, or Judaism, or Shamanism, or Scientology or Cabala make, they are empty and false claims because their slavery to these false gods gains them nothing because there is no one paying any attention to them.

3. What does he say is true of the Galatians as a result of his preaching the gospel to them? Why does he add the clarifying comment, "rather, are known by God"?

In v. 9 Paul says that as a result of his preaching the gospel to them and their being united to Christ by faith, they came to know God, the true and living God. They are sons of God through their faith in Christ. They are no longer slaves, laboring in the vineyard of a false god who can give them nothing. Notice how Paul clarifies himself. Let me use this illustration so you can marvel at the greatness of your salvation. Can I decide to become the friend of President Bush? Can I do anything that would make President Bush enter into a relationship of friendship and affection with me? I'm talking about a real relationship. One where we talk on the phone every week and go golfing and where we can stop by each other's homes unannounced and we spend our holidays together. Is it within my power to establish a friendship like that with the President of the U.S.? The answer is no, it is not within my power to know the President of in that way. However, I can enter into that kind of relationship if the President chooses to be my friend. If the President decides to know me, then I can know him. If the President pursues me, then I can pursue him. What Paul wants us to know is that the God who rules over supernovas and black holes and hurricanes and tsunamis and flu viruses and nations and Presidents has chosen to know you. He sent his son into the world, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem you from the curse of that law and to make you into his adult sons. He sent the Spirit of his son into your heart so you can cry out Abba, Father. He has made you his heir. This is what you have been given in Christ in contrast to the great slavery you were engaged in when you worshipped those gods who were not gods. Make no mistake about it, all who are outside of Christ are engaged in slavery to gods who are no gods. So he asks, how is it that you returning to those weak and miserable principles that governed your life when you were slaves? They are powerless to give you anything and they have nothing to give. This is in contrast to this amazing fact that the true and living God has chosen to love you and to be your father through Christ and make you his heir. He has exercised his mighty power on your behalf to remove all obstacles between you and he.

4. What, specifically, in v. 10 are they doing that proves that they are returning to the slavery of idol worship?

The false teachers have told them that God will only accept them into heaven if they keep the OT laws. This includes all the laws regarding Jewish religious festivals. They must keep all the Sabbath laws and not work on Saturday. They must observe the Day of Atonement. They must observe the monthly, New Moon festivals. They must go to Jerusalem three times each year and offer the prescribed sacrifices at each of the seasonal festivals. They must observe the year of Jubilee every seven years. Paul says that obedience to the OT laws in order to force God to accept you, specifically, the laws concerning holy days and festivals and years, which God commanded Israel to obey, is no different than worshipping idols. God hates idol worshippers. You cannot read the Bible without seeing how completely God abhors idol worship. However, God also hates those who obey his laws in order to make themselves acceptable to him. Those who believe that he is obligated to reward with eternal life those who keep the Sabbath, who observe the religious festivals, are no different to him than those who sacrifice their children to false gods.

5. If they continue to obey the Jewish rules regarding holy days what will that mean about Paul's preaching the gospel to them?

Paul says that the fact that they are keeping the Sabbath, the New Moon festival, the three feasts and the year of Jubilee makes his labor at preaching the gospel to them a complete waste of time. He preached so they would be set free and become sons. They, by obeying these laws, by becoming religious Jews, are returning to the slavery of idolatry from which God delivered them through the gospel.

6. Why does God love you, forgive you and promise to take you to heaven?

Many would say, because I prayed and asked Jesus into my life. Some might say because I was baptized or I joined the church. Others might say because I repented of all my sins or because I confess my sins. Others might correctly say they are forgiven

because Christ died for their sins and obeyed God's law perfectly in their place. However, then they feel perpetually guilty for not reading their Bible or praying as they ought. They feel close to God and accepted by God when they are not committing big sins and are maintaining some form of regular communication with God or when they go on a mission's trip. The gospel completely shatters human pride. God loves you for no reason in you. God does not love you more if you spend the day in fasting and prayer than if you spend the day watching TV. God is not impressed with anything that you do because everything you do is tainted with sin. You and I will never do a perfectly righteous act as long as we live on earth. Therefore, God will never love you because of what you do. We are always and only loved by God because of Christ. God wants you to live as his sons. He doesn't want you to work hard to make it to heaven because you will discover that all your labor accomplished nothing. You, like a slave, will receive no compensation for all your work because God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble.

God, in his love, through his spokespersons, pleads with you to trust in Christ alone because he wants you to live like a son, not a slave.

7. In v. 12 Paul begs the Galatians to become like him because he became like them. How did Paul become like them when he preached the gospel to them? (See 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 & 2 Cor. 6:11-13) Therefore, what is it about him that he wants them to imitate?

First, he is reminding him that when he was with them, even though he is Jewish, he did not live like a Jew. He ate the food they gave him and didn't ask any questions about what kind of meat it was or if it had been purchased in the local pagan temple. He didn't care if it was kosher or not. He didn't go through ritual washing after he gave the customary hug and kisses on the cheek to the Gentiles because he had become unclean. He didn't observe the Sabbath or Jewish fast days or feast days. He didn't tell them they had to be circumcised if they were going to be accepted by God. He says, "I want you to live like a free son of God, like me, not like some slave of false gods."

The second thing he is saying is that he did what he did out of love for them and so he wants them to love him back. As he says in dozens of other places in his letters, he suffered all that he suffered for the sake of the elect. He wants them to remember his beatings and being stoned and left for dead. He wants them to remember how much he loved them by becoming like them and so motivate them to love him and thus his message.

8. Paul says that the first time he visited them he had an illness (the Greek phrase could refer either to a disease or to physical wounds from beatings). He says that his "illness" was a trial (also could be "temptation") to them. How would an illness or the bruises and wounds of a beating be a trial to the Galatians?

There are several possibilities. If he's referring to an illness, then his sickness was of such a kind that normally it would provoke disgust and revulsion in those who observed it. It was the kind of disease that would cause people to leave his presence. In addition, an illness would have called into question the power and goodness of the God whom he represented. He is telling them of the God who made everything and of a Savior who healed all manner of diseases and cast out demons and who rose from the dead, and yet he, Paul, is afflicted with this terrible disease. What kind of evidence is this to the power of the gospel? If he is referring to the wounds of persecution, they would be a trial because of the fear that to listen to or follow what he said could lead them into similar persecution.

9. In spite of his "illness" how did the Galatians receive him?

The point he makes is this, "even though I preached the gospel to you while afflicted with this illness or these wounds, rather than rejecting me or fearing me or laughing in my face, you believed what I said. In fact you welcomed me as if I were an angel, even as if I were Christ Jesus himself." They trusted his message as being the very word of God, not the word of men. It's not only that they respected him but also that they loved him. That's the point of that amazing phrase, "if it were possible, you would have torn out your eyes for me." Their affection for Paul was genuine and wholehearted. The point here is this: they treated him as their friend because he told them the truth, not because of who he was. There was no human reason for them to be impressed with Paul or to so warmly welcome

him other than they, by the grace of God, believed that he was telling them the truth.

10. According to Jesus in Luke 10:16 what does the way you treat those who preach the gospel to you indicated about your response to the gospel? What is the implicit warning of Paul to the Galatians in v. 16?

The threat that stands behind Paul's assertion in v. 16 is that they, by becoming Paul's enemy, have become God's enemy. To reject those who preach the gospel to you because you don't like what they are saying is a very dangerous thing. God wants you to be his friend, not his enemy. Therefore, you should respect and love those who preach the gospel to you. You do not give your respect and affection to me, to your parents, to your small group leader, to a favorite radio preacher because you like our personality or our style of preaching and teaching or you agree with our politics or like the ministry style and philosophy of this church or that church, or in the case of parents, because they feed and cloth you, but because we tell you the truth about sin and judgment and righteousness and God and Christ. The respect and affection you have for those who share the gospel with you is the respect and affection you have for the Lord himself.

11. What's the main thing you should look for in a church or a pastor or a small group leader?

God, in his love, through his spokespersons, pleads with you to trust in Christ alone because he wants to be your friend not your enemy.

12. How are the false teachers treating the Galatians? Why are they treating them this way?

Paul acknowledges something that is true about every religious teacher in the world, whether true or false. Everyone who is out to persuade others of the truthfulness of their message is zealous for those whom they are seeking to convert. You will not find any religion or religious teacher who seeks to win converts by telling people "the only reason I'm here is to get your money or your possession or your bodies. I am here to use you to satisfy my ego, my lusts, my greed, my desire to be admired and to live

comfortably." You will not find any religion or religious teacher who will not act interested in you and be friendly and offer you assistance with the troubles you face in life. In short all religions and all religious teachers, whether true or false, will be zealous towards you. Both Paul and the false teachers were zealous for the Galatians.

However, he tells the Galatians that while the false teachers are showing a great interest in them, they do not have good motives. Their motives are to exclude or alienate them from the true and living God by alienating them from Paul and his message. And their goal is to bring them to the place where their loyalty is towards them alone, where the Galatians are zealous for the reputation and image and instruction of the false teachers. Paul says, "The only reason they are taking such a great interest in you is because they want you to be loyal to them, not because they want you to know God and experience the joy of being his sons." They want you to affirm them, not God.

13. Paul wants the Galatians to be zealous. What does he want them to be zealous about or for?

He wants them to be zealous for the good, that is, for Christ and his salvation, not for him. This is what Paul says over and over again in his letters. "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" "I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him." Paul cared about what people thought about him only because he cared about what people thought about Christ. His goal was not to have lots of people following him but to have lots of people following Christ. He labored like a woman delivering a baby for one purpose, that Jesus Christ might live in all of his fullness in redeemed sinners. What that means is that sinners trust in Christ alone and not their own performance. He wants people to be taken up with Christ, not him and not themselves. This is what God wants as well.

14. What (or who) are you zealous about (or for)?

God, in his love, through his spokespersons, pleads with you to trust in Christ alone because he wants you to be impressed with Christ.