



Galatians 4:8-20
 Finding Freedom: Galatians
 Christ Formed In You

Rev. Brian North
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We are in the middle of our series on Galatians, which is a letter from the late 40's or early 50's A.D. written by the Apostle Paul to the churches in Galatia that he helped start, 2-4 years after he started them. Galatia was a region that at that time was part of the Roman Empire, and in part of what is now the nation of Turkey. As old as this letter is, and as foreign as that part of the world might be to most of us, it is still completely relevant to us in our day and age.

Perhaps in today's passage we see its modern-day relevance as much as at any point in the letter thus far. These verses are a bit wide-ranging, but they are all aimed at helping these Galatian Christians continue to live by faith ...to live in the freedom that Jesus brings, and to help them grow in maturity as Jesus followers. And that's still the aim of this letter and of this passage: that we would grow in our own discipleship, experiencing the freedom that Jesus brings, and help others to know Him as well. So, let's dive into today's passage, **Galatians 4:8-20**.

One of my favorite songs (and albums) is by a band called, Thousand Foot Krutch, and the song is, *The End is Where We Begin*...and I want to briefly do that with today's passage. Because of the wide-ranging nature of this passage, it helps to remember what Paul's hope for them is. He says in verse 19 (almost the end of today's reading), **"I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you"** (Galatians 4:19). The whole goal of what he's writing, of his initial time with them when he taught them about Jesus, of his continued prayers for them and more, is all so that they would know Jesus and be completely centered on him. That's his only aim, his only concern. So that's where this is all headed, and that's the common thread throughout this passage and even what has come before.

So, with that in mind, let's go back up to the start of what we read. In the first few verses, **Paul reminds them of their past, before they met Father, Son, and Holy Spirit through his time with them.** They were slaves to other stuff. What would that have been? Some kind of false gods. Pagan religious

deities. Some of it might have been Greek mythological kinds of stuff; it might have been stuff that had deeper roots in their own Galatian culture before Rome swept through...it perhaps was a mixture of both.

And now **Paul has heard that they're reverting back to religious gobbledygook.** ☺ No, that's not a Greek Biblical word, and it's not a word you'll find in any theological dictionary, but it's exactly what they'd fallen back into. Here's the interesting thing, however: If you've been with us for the last few weeks you know that what they've fallen into is Jewish religious customs that were about a works righteousness. It puts righteousness through faith in Jesus on the back burner. They've had some Jewish Christians from Jerusalem who came along and said, "Hey, if you're going to follow the Jewish Messiah and do it right, you have to become Jewish and do Jewish stuff." And so that kind of sounded logical to them, even though it's not what Paul had taught them when he was with them...and so they started doing that stuff. We've seen that a whole bunch thus far in the letter.

But notice that now Paul is using language that sounds more like they're falling back into their own previous old religious stuff. He references the pagan gods (little "g") that they used to be slaves to...and he says they're turning back to those "weak and miserable forces." And then he asks in verse 9: "Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?" When you put it all together, he's essentially taking the Jewish religious practices they've started partaking in, and equating them to their former pagan religious stuff. He's lumping them all together. And none of it is of Christ.

You know, it's possible that *you* once were a part of some other religion before you knew Jesus. Or maybe you were into a pseudo-religious kind of thing like your horoscope. Or maybe you were essentially agnostic – believed God existed but didn't really consider God knowable or identifiable. Or maybe you were outright atheistic and believed that God doesn't exist and that universe is an organized, well-ordered cosmic accident that just happens to be able to sustain life here on earth.

Regardless of your past, it can be easy to slip back into old habits, or into new forms of those old habits – like doing certain religious stuff in order to

please God and gain his love. **The Christian message is that God loves you, and the only religious “thing” needed to be done was taken care of by Jesus on the cross.** For those of you who slipped back into old ways of thinking, or if you’ve never left those old ways of thinking, this may be the part of today’s sermon that you really need to hear. God loves you, and Jesus has done on the cross all that is needed to be able to be in relationship with God now and stand before Him in eternity. Anything we *do* beyond trusting Jesus is a *response* to what’s already done, and flows out of our faith in Jesus. That might be the most important thing some of us get today.

Beginning in verse 12, Paul then gets very personal and takes a different turn in what he writes: He appeals to the relationship that he has with them. “Become like me, for I became like you.” He then talks about the relationship they developed. He spent time with them. He invested in them. He sat down for a cup of coffee with them and got to know them...or however that looked. He got into their world and “became like” them (not in terms of their religious stuff, of course). And then he encourages them to become like him, meaning: his faith in Jesus. He’s not saying this in arrogance, but because he was with them, they know him, and he taught and modeled the faith for them. So it’s logical he would do this.

Who in your life could you encourage to “be like you” in regards to faith? Who are you discipling and mentoring? Part of our ministry philosophy here at Rose Hill is that we would be a church of disciples who make disciples. Who are the disciples that you are helping to train up and teach about Jesus? Who are you modeling the faith to, so that they would know Jesus and be inspired by you to train up the generation that comes after *them*?

And we might say, “Well...Pastor...Hello!?!...There’s a pandemic. I can’t really impact people right now.” Look: **The pandemic is an obstacle, but it’s not an excuse. There’s a difference.** Even Paul was ill – we don’t know what it was – but he wasn’t well. It was a trial even to the Galatians, he says in verse 14, and that they “didn’t treat him with contempt or scorn.” So, this was no case of the sniffles or allergies. He had something going on that was really ugly – like maybe actually physically ugly, or even embarrassing. But

they welcomed him and cared for him. And it was because of that illness that Paul first preached the gospel to them.

Do you think difficult circumstances – a pandemic, personal illness, financial hardship, challenges at work – do you think that those kinds of things are good reasons *not* to live out our faith and share Jesus with people, and engage in ministry that helps make and shape disciples of Jesus? To me, the answer is: Absolutely not. In fact: **Sometimes these very things are what God uses to bring the good news of Jesus into people’s lives through Jesus followers like you and me.** We see that here in this passage.

Maxie Dunnam shares this powerful true story of God working through someone’s difficult circumstance to minister to people. He writes:

“Lizzie Johnson made thousands of bookmarks. At thirteen Lizzie injured her back in an accident, and she was to spend the rest of her life, twenty-seven more years, flat on her back. Her only view of the world was from a mirror mounted above her head. But she still wanted to do a great thing with her life, so when she heard in those days that you could free an African slave for \$40, she made a quilt and tried to sell it for \$40. Nobody would buy it. So she turned to making bookmarks, and she raised \$1,000 a year for each of the next twenty-seven years remaining in her life.

What about the quilt? One day a bishop from India was traveling through Illinois and she gave it to him. He took that quilt with him on his speaking tour around the country, and he told the story of Lizzie Johnson. Then he asked people if they would place an offering for missions in the quilt. He raised \$100,000 for missions.

“One day after Lizzie Johnson had died, her sister, Alice Johnson heard that a man named Takuo Matsumoto was coming to Champaign, Illinois, to speak. He was one of the most prominent Japanese Christians after the Second World War. He had been principal of the Methodist Girls’ School in Hiroshima during the bombing.

“Alice Johnson remembered that her sister had given money to support the education of a young boy in Japan named Takuo Matsumoto, and she

*wondered if this was the same person. She resolved to go to Champaign to hear him speak, but she got sick that day and had to stay home. **That night someone told Mr. Matsumoto about her, and he said, “You mean that she is Lizzie Johnson’s sister? All that I am I owe to Lizzie Johnson.”** That night he went to see Alice Johnson, and he went from there to the cemetery to put flowers on the grave of a woman who could not leave her bed, who was weak and helpless, but who stitched up her love in bookmarks and quilts and said, “Thank you God,” by loving others.”*

Whether it’s a pandemic or you’re flat on your back for 27 years, or some other obstacle, there’s something you can do to impact people with the love of God and help shape another generation of disciples. There may be obstacles to ministry and discipling others, but that doesn’t mean those obstacles are excuses. There’s a difference. Paul shows us that.

The last thing I want to highlight from this stretch is from verse 16: **“Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?” (Galatians 4:16).** I wonder why Paul wrote this. Did he anticipate that they would not appreciate his words, even if they were truthful and spoken with love? Maybe he dealt with some of this stuff when he was there...and though they turned a corner to faith in Jesus, perhaps his message of “you can’t blend Jesus with this other stuff” was met with resistance and so he knew there would be resistance again now that they’ve slipped back into old habits. Maybe he communicated with them earlier in a letter that hasn’t survived the centuries, and he got feedback that they weren’t happy about his words to them? Who knows?

But: As I read this I can’t help but think of the phrase, “Don’t shoot the messenger.” If you’ve ever been the one to tell some hard truths to someone because you cared for them, but they didn’t necessarily want to hear that truth, you know how difficult it can be. The whole motivation can be because of love and you want what’s best for that person...but the truth can still be hard to deliver, and sometimes the other person can get defensive. All I can say, and you’ve probably experienced this yourself, is that you’ve got to deliver the truth with love...reminding the person that you care for them and you want what’s best for them. Ephesians 4:15, which is a verse from one of

Paul's other letters, says, **“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4:15).** Today's passage (even all of Galatians) is an expanded version of that verse, and putting it into practice: Paul is telling them some hard truths, because he wants Christ to be formed in them...to be birthed in them.

Now, let's flip the script. **If someone is delivering a hard truth to you because they love you, then don't get angry at them for saying it: don't “shoot the messenger.”** The message is one thing...it might be hard to hear...but don't be angry at the one delivering it, *especially* if it's someone you trust and love and you know loves you or at least someone you know wants what's best for you...wants you to succeed. Maybe after considering it you think they're off-base...that's fine...not everyone's advice or observations are accurate or take in the bigger picture. But give a listen.

Consider if what they're saying has a modicum of truth to it. They might say, “Hey, you've been working a lot lately and haven't seen your family much.” Or, “You've been staring at the screen a lot, even at the dinner table.” Or, “You're going through money like it's growing on trees.” Or, “You haven't put together an offensive line in 9 years that can protect your franchise quarterback.” ☺ Sometimes the truth is hard to hear, but if it's *true*, then we need to hear it. In John 8:32, Jesus says that the truth will set you free. Paul's letter to these Galatians churches is all about helping them to experience freedom in Christ. They need to hear the truth, just like we do, in order to truly be free in Christ.

And so, that brings us to the end of this passage, where we started: All of this, as wide-ranging as it is, is connected to growing in discipleship to Jesus. Paul wants nothing more than for the people of these churches to be completely focused on Jesus and to grow in Him. And now that becomes God's word to us, and it is my hope for us as well. **I want to see us growing in Christ so that we would:**

- 1. Be a church of Disciples making disciples;**
- 2. Be a church that rids ourselves of idols and old beliefs so we'd be only about Jesus and His Kingdom;**

3. **Not let obstacles become excuses for our disciple making and our growing God's Kingdom;**
4. **Speak and acknowledge the truth in love.**

And the hard truth to acknowledge here at RH is that: we've got work to do in regards to these things. That's the truth. I say it because I love you and I love this church – so don't shoot the messenger. ☺ I love our church's past, its present, and its future. I love the community in which we live. And there's a lot of room for us as a congregation to flourish...there's a lot of room for growth and improvement in following Jesus as his disciples – particularly in being disciples who make disciples. Just this week I came across this phrase, **“The biggest room in the world is the room for improvement.”** It's a fantastic line, and I'd never heard it before. I don't know how that's happened, but I just came across this statement, this week.

The truth – that I speak in love because of my love for Rose Hill – is that we have a lot of room to improve as a church; there's a lot of flourishing left to do. And I wonder, like the Galatian churches as Paul writes: Are there things from *our* past that we're hanging onto that are preventing Christ from being “formed” in us? Or are there obstacles that have become excuses in regards to discipling the next generation of parents or teenagers or younger kids – or whoever is new to faith in Jesus regardless of their age? We want to give consideration to these kinds of things for ourselves and for our congregation, because we want to flourish, and there's room for more of that.

We want Christ to be formed in us – individually, and collectively as a church family through discipleship classes, small groups, Bible studies, serving in our community and loving on the people in our neighborhoods. We want to shine the light of Christ. I know these things are at the heart of this church, and that none of this is for ourselves...It's not about the kingdom of RH and if I ever hear talk like that I will shut it down. It's all for the glory of God and for the flourishing of His Kingdom. So, I invite you to step out in trust and faith, to let go of a past that may be holding you or us back, and conquer the obstacles to be a church of disciples making disciples...who carry it on to make disciples, who make disciples...and on it goes. As we do that we will see Christ formed in us and in others as well. Let's pray...Amen.