



Free in Christ • free to grow • galatians 4:8-30 • 07/01/2018

Main Point

Freedom comes when Christ captivates our heart and transforms us into His likeness through the study of His Word.

Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Do you ever feel like you have to perform to get people to approve of you or love you? In what kinds of situations are you most likely to feel that way (i.e., parenting, work, friendships, etc.)?

Does that need for performance-approval ever bleed over into your relationship with God? If so, what does that indicate about the way you view God's love?

What in your current life or your past might contribute to the belief that you have to perform in order for God to love you?

A firm belief in God's unchanging love is essential for us to move forward spiritually. Until we truly believe God loves us, apart from our performance, our spiritual lives will be stagnant. We'll constantly try to prove ourselves to God. Fortunately, the gospel helps us see that we are free from this lie because of what Jesus has done on our behalf. True freedom comes when Christ captivates our heart and transforms us into His likeness by grace, not our works.

Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ GALATIANS 4:8-14.

How did Paul contrast the Galatians' lives before Christ and their lives after coming to Christ?

What was Paul asking in his rhetorical questions in verse 9? How would you respond if you were asked the same thing?

How can believers avoid slipping back into enslavement to old habits and comfort zones?

In Galatians 4:3, Paul had referred to Jews' and Gentiles' being enslaved "under the elemental forces of the world"—rudimentary elements of religion or the heavenly bodies and spirit powers associated with them. Through God's gift of grace in Christ and their faith response, the Galatian believers had been adopted into God's family and had received the Spirit of His Son (see 4:4-6). They no longer were slaves but were children and heirs (see v. 7). Paul was dismayed that they would forsake a close fellowship of grace to pursue one based on works of the law.

What are some of the "weak and bankrupt elemental forces" that keep Christians today from growing in their faith? What pointless rules and rituals are we under pressure to conform to?

How can reflecting on our past and our spiritual milestones (as Paul encouraged the Galatian Christians to do in verses 13-15) encourage us to grow in relationship with God?

The cure for legalism is realizing that we were enslaved but Christ has set us free. We need to recognize and resist temptations that would place us back in bondage to rules and rituals. We do not need to obey these. We need to obey Christ.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ GALATIANS 4:15-20.

How had false teachings influenced the Galatians? Describe Paul's response to this turn of events.

Why did Paul ask in verse 16 whether he was now an enemy of the Galatian believers? What concern did he express in regard to their relationship with the legalistic Judaizers? How was this more than mere partisan rivalry and jealousy?

"They" in verse 17 refers to the Judaizers who were trying to convince the Galatians that Paul was a liar and their enemy. The Judaizers wanted to drive a wedge between these believers and Paul. They wanted to win the believers' allegiance to themselves and to their belief of works-righteousness. Paul's concern for the Galatian believers would continue until Christ was "formed in them (v. 19)." As we mature in our faith, we

are transformed as the nature and character of Jesus are developed in us. The Judaizers' legalistic teaching threatened to stunt that development.

How does a relationship with God based on performance and keeping the rules take the joy out of the Christian life? How can we cultivate an ongoing enthusiasm for godliness and the things of God?

We can progressively become more like Jesus, but only as we continue to grow in our faith. Christian growth begins with our relationship with Jesus. When we place our faith in Him for salvation, we become members of His family. He has set us free from the sins and laws that formerly kept us in bondage. We grow if we do not fall back into slavery to these things. As we grow in faith, we will become more and more like Jesus in our attitudes and character.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ GALATIANS 4:21-31.

Who are the “sons of the slave”? Who are the “sons of the free woman”? Why did Paul make his point by talking about the mothers and not the father?

What was the result of being a child of the free woman? What was the inheritance that Paul was talking about?

Paul referenced the story of Hagar and Sarah, pointing out that while the sons had the same father, they had different mothers. Judaizers, just like Christians, came from the Jewish faith. However the Judaizers, the children of the bond woman, lived under the oppression of the law. Paul wanted the Galatians to realize they were the children of the promise and the children of the Spirit. They were free from the persecution of their brothers and able to inherit the blessings of God.

What goals are the lies we are frequently subjected to trying to accomplish? How does understanding the gospel protect us?

Things today haven't changed all that much from Paul's time, the most prevalent lie that is alive and well in the false teaching around us today is the idea that you can save yourself. The gospel, however, teaches us that we ourselves are the problem. Our only hope, therefore, is to look Christ and the salvation He provides.

Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How can our church teach grace in a way that seeks out the good of others? What might happen if we taught the gospel for our own gain?

How might we as a group help each other to stay focused on the gospel? How might we help each other live according to the grace we have received in Christ?

Pray

God, show us to walk in Your grace; help us to trust in Your Word; give us great zeal for Your purpose.

Commentary

| galatians 4:8-30

4:8-9. Before Christ, the Galatians had been slaves to pagan gods such as Zeus and Hermes. When they believed in Christ, they had been delivered from this bondage. They could not claim any credit to say they had achieved a knowledge of God. God had taken all the initiative to form a love relationship with them so that he knew them. Now Paul asked them why they were turning back to the weak and miserable bondage of legalism which could not produce life or righteousness or freedom.

4:10. The Judaizers had persuaded the Galatians to observe the Mosaic calendar. These seasonal events included special days (weekly sabbaths), months (new moons), and seasons (Festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles). The Galatians kept these festivals to gain God's favor.

4:11. If they continued in legalism, Paul feared that his efforts on them would have been wasted. This could mean one of two things. It could mean that the Galatians were true Christians but that Paul's efforts to spur them on to spiritual maturity in Christ were not fruitful. Or it could mean that he feared that not turning from their legalism could indicate that they were never Christians in the first place.

4:12. This passage opens a window for us into Paul's pastoral heart. When the apostle pleaded with the Galatians to become like him, he was referring to his life of faith as opposed to their observance of Jewish rituals and regulations (see Gal. 2:20). Paul wanted the Galatians to experience the same kind of freedom in Christ that he knew. From the time Paul had met Christ, he had realized that rabbinic traditions and ceremonial law were not necessary steps to knowing God. Paul became like his audience in order to win them to Christ. Through such cultural accommodations, however, Paul never compromised his convictions. This behavior on Paul's part was not an inconsistency but an intentional strategy to reach others for Christ.

4:13. Paul had made his first visit to Galatia because of some physical "illness." Various suggestions regarding the nature of this illness include malaria, epilepsy, or some type of eye disorder. Whatever the nature of the illness, Paul's Galatian readers could recall what had occurred ("as you know"). In any case, this verse points out God's overriding providence. Paul recognized God at work in leading him to proclaim the gospel to the Galatians.

4:14. In this verse the KJV uses a literal translation, "my temptation which was in my flesh," while the NIV has a literary translation, "my illness." Sicknesses and weaknesses commonly were viewed as forms of divine judgment in that time and culture. Instead of rejecting Paul because of his illness, however, the Galatians had warmly welcomed him. They had sacrificially accepted the trial or unpleasant symptoms resulting from

Paul's illness. Instead of kicking Paul out, the Galatians had received both the messenger and the message. They had welcomed him as if he were an angel of God or Christ Jesus Himself. The Galatians previously had recognized and received Paul as a genuine apostle of the Lord. Why were they currently turning against Paul after all they and the apostle had been through together?

4:15. The Galatians had expressed profound joy over Paul's presence with them and his spiritual message. This Greek word translated joy is related closely to the word translated "blessed" in the Beatitudes (see Matt. 5:3-11). The term conveys a state of well-being that comes from a right relationship with God. As a result of receiving Paul's message of freedom in Christ, the Galatian believers had experienced spiritual blessings and inner joy. When they turned to legalism, however, their joy was gone. Living by the law (rules and regulations) meant a loss of spiritual blessings for the Galatians and a loss of the blessings of Christian fellowship for both them and Paul.

The Galatians' previous joy had generated a spirit of sacrifice to the point that they would have torn out their eyes and given them to Paul. Some Bible scholars suggest that Paul's reference to eyes indicates that his physical affliction involved some form of eye disorder. On the other hand, Paul may have been using a proverbial phrase that implied great sacrifice.

4:16. In any case, Paul pointed out that the Galatians had been ready to do whatever they possibly could to help him. Now, however, they had turned against him as if he were their enemy. Moreover, they were not only rejecting Paul, who was telling them the truth, but also believing the false teachers who were telling them lies.

4:17. The Judaizers ("those people") showed great interest in the Galatians by demonstrating the kind of devotion a man might show toward a woman while courting her ("are zealous to win you over"). The false teachers showed special concern for the Galatians' welfare, became their best friends, and served as ready counselors to give advice. The only problem was the Judaizers' motive—it was wrong and self-centered ("for no good"). What did the false teachers hope to accomplish by the attention they focused on the Galatians? They wanted to alienate (literally, "to shut out") the Galatians. From what did the Judaizers wish to alienate the Galatians? By supplying the words "from us," translators suggest that the false teachers wanted to alienate the Galatians from Paul and his companions. Other interpreters suggest the Judaizers wanted to alienate the Galatians from their freedom in Christ or from Christ Himself.

4:18. Paul had nothing at all against spiritual zeal, as long as it was for righteous purposes. Indeed, zeal can be evidence of a thriving, growing faith. Therefore, Paul wanted the Galatians to grow in zeal for Christ, whether in the apostle's presence or in his absence. The problem was that in Paul's absence, the Galatians' zeal had taken a direction inconsistent with the truth. The fact that such defection had occurred demonstrated just how immature the Galatians were in their faith.

4:19. In spite of all these concerns, Paul still addressed the Galatians as “dear children,” evidence that he was not questioning their salvation. Their tendency to turn to false teaching had caused Paul agony. Previously, when he had labored so hard among them presenting the gospel and yearning for them to become Christians, he was like a mother experiencing the pains of childbirth. At the present time he again found himself in similar agony because the apostle wanted them to mature in Christ. Paul identified the process of Christian maturity as Christ being formed in them.

4:20. Paul concluded this part of his letter by expressing his longing to be with the Galatians. He was deeply concerned about his children in Christ and wanted to help them through the crisis they were facing.

4:21. The “law” does not refer specifically to the law of Moses, but to the Books of the Law—the Pentateuch (i.e., Genesis–Deuteronomy). Paul’s logic was that even the law itself would dispute the view of the false teachers.

4:22-23. Genesis records the births of these two sons—Ishmael, born to Hagar, a slave, and Isaac, born to Sarah, a free woman. Ishmael was born “according to... the flesh,” because Sarah and Abraham used Hagar to have a son by their own ingenuity, not through patient trust in God’s promise (Gen 16). Isaac was born as God promised (Gen. 15:4; 17:16-17; 21:1-3) after many years of waiting by Abraham and Sarah.

4:24-26. Paul declared that he was using these things as illustrations in an elaborate allegory. On one side of the comparison of covenants is (a) Mount Sinai, where the law of Moses was given, (b) Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, and (c) the present Jerusalem, from which the false teachers had come to Syrian Antioch (2:11-13) and Galatia. This side of the comparison represents spiritual slavery through the law. On the other side of the comparison is the Jerusalem above, a Jewish hope that will be fully realized only in the new heavens and new earth (Rev 21:2,9–22:5). Interestingly, Sarah is not referred to as the mother at this point, but “the Jerusalem above” is.

4:27. The quote from Isaiah 54:1 in this verse deals with the fact that the children born after the exile were more fortunate and greater in number than those righteously judged for breaking the law. The implication is that those who still rely on the law are being replaced by the church and its law-free gospel.

4:28-30. Paul assumed that those in the Galatian churches would return to his view and show themselves to be children of promise (i.e., Abraham’s seed through faith in Christ; 3:29). But, as Ishmael persecuted Isaac in Gen. 21:9-10, it is to be expected that the Judaizers will persecute true Christians. Paul was confident that eventually his opponents would be exiled from among God’s people, while his own view would receive the inheritance.

4:31. Paul placed himself and the Galatians on the side of Isaac and his descendants, the Jews, while his opponents are children of the slave, making them non-Jews.

Next Week's Reading

