

Paul's Concern for the Galatian Believers to Grow in Christ

Galatians 4:12-20

Galatians 4:12-20: *"Brethren, I urge you to become like me, for I became like you. You have not injured me at all. ¹³ You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. ¹⁴ And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ What then was the blessing you enjoyed? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me. ¹⁶ Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth? ¹⁷ They zealously court you, but for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them. ¹⁸ But it is good to be zealous in a good thing always, and not only when I am present with you. ¹⁹ My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you, ²⁰ I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you."*

Background Notes

In verse 20, why did the apostle Paul say that he was perplexed and had doubts about the Galatian believers? The reason for his concern was that the churches in Galatia had come under the influences of the false teaching of Judaism. Paul was concerned that the Christians were turning away from the pure gospel of God's grace in Christ Jesus.

The false teaching of the Judaizers put a great emphasis on following the works and regulations of the Old Testament Law. As we mentioned earlier, there were both Christian Judaizers and non-Christian Judaizers. The non-Christian Judaizers said that keeping the Law was necessary for salvation. The Christian Judaizers acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah and Savior, but they said that sanctification, or a more holy Christian life, came by keeping the Law. The Judaizers were the legalists of that day.

Paul refuted both works-oriented salvation and works-orientated sanctification in his epistle to the Galatians. **Works-oriented sanctification** was his focus in this section of Galatians 4. In verse 12, notice that the apostle addressed these Galatians as "*brethren*." They were saved, but they were not growing in Christ. Why not? They weren't growing because they had bought into the false teaching of the Judaizers and had adopted an improper use of the Old Testament Law (the Law of Moses).

That's why Paul said, "*Brethren, I urge you to become like me, for I became like you*" (v12). In other words, "I urge you to become free from the Law as I am, because I became like you Gentiles, no longer living under the Law." Of all things, these Gentile Christians were wrongly putting themselves under the rules and regulations of the Jewish law after they had become Christians! Paul had been under the Law **before** he became a Christian - but he had been freed up from having to follow the requirements of the Law after he became a Christian.

The reason for this irony was that the false teaching of the Judaizers taught the gentile believers just the opposite. The Judaizers had a wrong view of the purpose of the Law. In this section of Galatians 4 the character and tactics of those false teachers was described. It is important for us to learn this information, because the same character traits and tactics are typical of false teachers today.

Doctrinal Points

1. False teachers are not concerned about their own integrity.

In verses 12-15 Paul reminded the Galatians of the wonderful relationship that they had shared together in the early days after their conversion. When Paul had come to Galatia with the gospel of Jesus Christ, they had received the **message** with joy - and they had received the **messenger** with joy as well.

When Paul first visited Galatia, apparently he was ill with a physical infirmity. We don't know what his problem was, but as a result, Paul was anything but eloquent when he preached to the Galatians. However, the Galatians did not belittle him, or look down on him, or despise him in any way. They accepted and believed the gospel, and they received Paul "*even as an angel of God*" - even as they would have received Jesus Himself! "*And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus*" (v14).

At that time, the Galatians were so appreciative of the apostle that if possible, they would have "plucked out their own eyes" and given them to the apostle Paul! "*For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me*" (v15). Because of this verse some commentators believe that the apostle Paul had a disease of the eyes. They think that this may have been the "thorn in the flesh" to which he referred in 2 Corinthians 12:7: "*lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me.*" And in 2 Corinthians 12:11 Paul referred to the large letters he had written "with his own hand" (presumably rather than using his secretary or amanuensis.) Verse 11 is also used to support the idea that Paul had bad eyesight because of an eye disease. This is only speculation, because there is no conclusive evidence that Paul had a disease of the eyes.

However, the expression "plucked out your eyes for me" may have been a common expression in that day. It would have meant giving up everything, or giving up something of great value for another person - not an indication of eye trouble. In the same way, the expression "you're twisting my arm" that we use today has nothing to do literally with putting your arm out of joint – it simply means you're very persuasive!

In any case, there had been a wonderful relationship between the apostle Paul and the converts in Galatia, and they had enjoyed great blessing (v15). But something had happened to that great relationship: "*Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?*" (v16). What had happened to that great joy and blessing of verse 15?

The false teachers had come into the Galatian churches, and they had undermined the apostle Paul's authority and character. They falsely taught that Paul was wrong about the Law. They said that Paul had misled these new Christians - and that he didn't have their best interest in view. And the false teachers even used the "ad homonym" approach as well, by criticizing Paul's appearance and his teaching style.

As a result, the Galatian believers had begun to treat Paul as an "enemy" - when Paul was telling them the truth! The reason, of course, was that the Judaizers were lying about Paul and the message of freedom he was teaching. These false teachers could not have cared less about their own integrity, as long as they could discredit Paul!

This scheme is still true today. When false teachers can't deny the truth of the message of the Bible, they start to attack the messenger. They call the messenger mean-spirited, or narrow-minded, or bigoted, or intolerant, or unspiritual, or an uneducated "country preacher." False teachers are not concerned about their own integrity.

2. False teachers are not concerned about the welfare of others.

Verse 17: *"They zealously court you, but for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them."*

The false teachers were doing whatever they could to alienate the Galatian converts from the apostle Paul's influence and teachings. They zealously flattered the Galatians in order to gain a following, but not because they were concerned about the spiritual welfare of the Galatians. No! They were only interested in tuning the Galatian believers into zealous disciples of the Judaizers.

This tactic is still true today. Take the cults, for example. They are not really interested in the welfare of the people they try to "convert" to their teachings. They are more interested in gaining a larger following for their cult. This is also true of Christian legalists - those believers who think that holiness comes from keeping a bunch of man-made rules and regulations. They are more concerned about rule keeping than the spiritual welfare of believers.

In verse 18, Paul said that there is nothing wrong with being zealous, and he didn't mind others teaching and caring for the Galatians when he was not there, but ***the teaching must be the truth*** and ***the motive must be pure!*** This was definitely not the case with the false teachers. They were only interested in gaining a following for themselves and their false doctrines.

False teachers are not concerned about the welfare of others.

Practical Applications

1. Have you “gone into labor” lately?

Verse 19: *“My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you.”* Paul likened his relationship with the Galatians to a mother and the birth of a baby. Figuratively, he “went into labor” at the time of their salvation. It was hard work, but the result was well worth the labor!

Now Paul was in labor again in regard to their Christian growth. He wanted the believers in Galatia to be set free from the negative influence of the false teachers. He wanted to see Christ formed in them - Christ living in them and through them. As he wrote in Galatians 2:20, *“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. And the life which I now live in the flesh, I now live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.”* Paul wanted the Galatian converts to grow in grace in the same way – to live by faith in Jesus alone. He was so concerned for them that (figuratively speaking) he “went into labor” on their behalf.

Are we as concerned as Paul was about the new Christians that we know? Or do we just “hope” that they will go to church and that “somehow” they’ll get their spiritual act together by themselves? Are we so concerned for their Christian growth that we are willing to work hard to help them grow spiritually mature?

Have **you** “gone into labor” lately?

2. Would the apostle Paul be perplexed about you?

Verse 20: *“I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you.”* As the apostle Paul looked at the wavering Galatians, he was perplexed. He couldn’t understand how and why they had fallen prey to the false teaching of the Judaizers. Their susceptibility to false teaching even raised doubts in his mind about the sincerity of their faith!

Remember what Paul wrote in Galatians 1:6-7? *“I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.”* Paul was genuinely concerned about the faith of the Galatian believers. Was their faith truly rooted in Christ? Had they **really** become believers?

Suppose the apostle Paul were to look at your life and your lifestyle. Would he have doubts about your commitment to Christ? Would he be perplexed because of the way you live? Would he see a woeful lack of Bible knowledge - even though you’ve been a Christian for years? Would he see a lot of rule keeping and churchgoing - but not a lot of love and devotion for Christ and for others? Would he wonder why you’re living very comfortably - while other believers are living in poverty?

Would the apostle Paul be perplexed about you?