

Choose the Gospel of Grace

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[0 : 00] Now, having reminded ourselves of those truths in Galatians, let's now turn to Galatians chapter 4 in our Bibles on page 1170.

And we're going to read from verse 8 to verse 20. So just as we saw the heart of Moses, the spiritual leader, so we see the heart here of Paul, the pastor, as he urges the church in Galatia to choose the gospel of grace.

So Galatians chapter 4 and at verse 8. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.

But now that you know God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you're turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?

You're observing special days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you. I plead with you, brothers, become like me, for I became like you.

[1 : 13] You have done me no wrong. As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn.

Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.

Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us so that you may be zealous for them.

It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always and not just when I am with you. My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone because I am perplexed about you.

Amen. Amen. We'll leave our reading there. Now, I don't know if you happened to see the news coverage of the Freshers' Week at Sheffield University.

[2 : 43] There was one stall at Freshers' Week that drew media attention because it was a stall where people were giving advice to new students on how they could take illegal drugs safely.

We're all going to have our opinions on that. The logic seemed to be, well, it's happening anyway. Let's be aware of that and let's try and keep our students from serious harm.

So you may well have your opinion whether you agree or disagree with that. But the thing that struck me is that this was clearly not a policy designed by a parent.

Because if a parent was talking to a child, I would imagine that conversation would go very differently. I hope it would. Please don't do that.

It could wreck your life. Don't play with what could kill you. This is not something impulsive and impersonal. This is deeply, profoundly important.

[3 : 45] So we come to today's Bible reading. And we've been in this letter that Paul has been writing to the Galatians. And here we come to a really personal section of the letter. Here we find a reminder that this is written by Paul the pastor.

Not Paul the academic. Not Paul who's simply a theologian. Paul who cares. He's got the heart of a loving father to children who are wandering away from truth.

Because they're wandering away from Jesus. They're making terrible choices. And so he is pleading with them. Please don't give up on Jesus.

The Jesus who loves you and gave you everything. He's pleading with them. Don't follow ways of life and beliefs that will lead ultimately to your spiritual death.

So here we're being introduced to Paul's pastor's heart. So that image is there's a shepherd and there's sheep. And the job of the shepherd is to care for, to lead, to guide, to protect sheep.

[4 : 53] And that then becomes the image of a pastor over a church. So let's look at his heart. Let this be a personal letter for us.

In effect, where we hear this message, this important message. Choose Jesus. The first thing that Paul the pastor brings to his church is this message.

Choose freedom in Christ. Let's look first of all at his heart. In verses 8 to 11, this is where we are. We find Paul's heart in verse 11.

He says, I fear for you that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you. So he has this genuine concern that his gospel ministry will be ineffective if they choose slavery.

And we'll think about what that slavery is. Over freedom in Christ. Now what does he mean by that? Let's look at verse 8. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.

[6 : 02] Formerly. He's talking about their pre-Christian past. Before they knew Jesus, they were slaves to false gods and idols. That was where their worship went.

They were making offerings. They were bringing gifts to these idols, hoping to earn the favor of the gods, hoping to escape the punishment of the gods.

They were in slavery because they thought, well, I need to do these things in order for this god or these gods to be pleased with me. But now, and this is where Paul is really concerned, is that they've picked up a new kind of slavery.

So the second half of verse 9. How is it that you're turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?

You're observing special days and months and seasons and years. So this new slavery is the one that the false teachers have brought, where they've been told that you need to observe the whole law of Moses, including all the ceremonies, in order to be accepted.

[7 : 11] So now they're slaves again because they're hoping that their obedience will bring them acceptance and salvation from the God of the Bible. They've lost grip of the fact that Jesus has done everything.

He has made that once-for-all sacrifice that takes away sin, that brings us into God's family. And so they've become slaves again. Different kind of slavery.

When they were idol worshipers, they were very immoral people. And now that they're slaves to the law, they've become very moral people. But that swap from immoral to moral is not the way that we are saved.

That's one of the things that people maybe, if they misunderstand Christianity, they think, well, I need to become very moral and good and obedient. That's what Christianity is about. And what Paul is saying, that's actually a different kind of slavery.

Because at root, it's saying, well, I need to earn. I need to perform. I need to do this or that.

Whereas the message of Christianity is God has done everything for us in Jesus.

[8 : 16] It's a message to receive by faith, not to work, to earn. So why is Paul distressed and fearful? He's distressed because he knows them.

He loves them. They're a church that has believed the gospel, the good news of Jesus. Just for a couple of moments, let's turn back to Galatians chapter 1, verses 3 and 4.

This is the kind of message that they heard from Paul that they had received. What is the good news at the heart of Christianity?

Well, according to the will, the plan of God, he has sent his one and only son, Jesus, into our world to rescue us from our sins in order to bring us peace with God.

And this comes to us not because we earn it. We're told here it comes as a gift of God's grace.

They had received that message or the message of chapter 2 and at verse 16.

[9 : 42] They've been taught very clearly that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. How can somebody be accepted by God?

How can somebody be declared not guilty by God? It's not by keeping the law. It's by faith. It's by trusting in the completed work of Jesus.

So they had known this and Paul is distressed because they are leaving it behind. Swapping freedom in Christ for a form of slavery.

In verse 9, he reminds them and us of their freedom. Now that you know God, or rather are known by God.

Now, knowing God is described in the Bible as freedom because that's what we were made for. In Genesis chapter 1, we are made in the image of God so that we might know God.

[10:48] We might share in his love. We might enter into relationship with him. So to know God is freedom. And the hope of Christian freedom is not just that we know God, but that he knows us.

Which takes us back to last week and the adoption language. We are known and loved by God. He brings us into his family. And in God's family, that's where true security is found.

And that's where real freedom is found. J.I. Packer, a Bible teacher, puts it really well when he says this. What matters supremely is that God knows me.

I am graven on the palms of his hands. I am never out of his mind. He knows me as a friend. One who loves me.

And there is no moment when his eye is off me or when his care falters. So here is Paul the pastor saying to his people, you have received your freedom.

[11:59] You are known by God. It would be crazy to return to slavery. Some of you will have seen or read 12 Years a Slave, I am sure.

It's the true story of a man by the name of Solomon Northrup. And it basically tells the story of Solomon as a beginning life as a free man in the northern part of the United States.

And then he travels south and he's kidnapped. And he doesn't have proper papers. So he's forced into slavery for 12 years. And so the book and then the movie tells the story of his trials.

He's ill-treated by a variety of different people. It tells of his fight to regain freedom until towards the end of the story, eventually he receives his relief.

It would be incredibly bizarre if having received that freedom, Solomon Northrup decided, Do you know what?

[13:06] I'm going to go back and find myself a different slave master. Life was better as a slave. If slavery was the happily ever after of that story, it would be a very strange story indeed.

And so Paul here is reminding his people, don't choose slavery. Don't choose the slavery of trying to save yourself when Jesus Christ has already set you free.

Don't choose the slavery of trying to save yourself either by thinking true freedom comes from being really, really far away from God, where you can just live as you please and do what you want, or the slavery of thinking that you need to obey and perform before God will ever accept you.

Hear this call to enjoy freedom as a child of God by trusting in Jesus. I came across a nice story this week of John Newton.

John Newton, who was a former slave trader, as it happens, who is the author of the hymn Amazing Grace. Became a Christian, became a pastor, became a hymn writer, wrote Amazing Grace.

[14:23] And he lived in a small town called Olney. And above his fireplace in that small town in Olney, he had engraved words above his fireplace.

Words from Deuteronomy 15 verse 15, which say, Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you.

Newton never wanted to forget that he had been, a slave to sin, and that Jesus Christ had set him free. And so here again is this encouragement from Paul the pastor.

Never lose sight of the freedom Jesus secures for us at the cross. The second section of this very personal part of the letter encourages us to choose a gospel-centered life.

Verses 12 to 16. So we see his heart again. Verse 12. I plead with you. I plead with you, brothers, brothers and sisters, those who are in the family of God.

[15:38] And then he goes on to say words that are perhaps not easy to understand at first glance. Become like me, for I became like you.

What does he mean when he says that? He's saying to them, become like me in living out your Christian freedom.

Become like me to the extent that I am being transformed by the gospel of God's grace. Become like me in the sense of letting Jesus direct your life.

And that's why he says, become like me, for I became like you. So let's have a quick recap of Paul's story. Paul was raised and educated as a very religious Jew, trained to keep all the law of God very rigorously.

And part of that, part of his teaching, part of his culture, was then to keep separate from those who are unlike him. So people in the Jewish world who were more sinful than him, he would avoid.

[16:47] Gentiles would definitely be avoided as dogs and sinners. But when Jesus met with him on the road to Damascus, when Jesus saved him, when Jesus changed his heart, he gave him a new mission and a new understanding of the world.

He gave him a mission to bring the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles. And so Paul can say, I became like you because after meeting with Jesus, Paul will live with Gentiles.

He will eat with them. He will treat them as brothers because the gospel had created love and unity that crossed over those social, cultural, religious barriers.

Become like me in living out the gospel. And I showed you that because I became like you. And then the last little sentence of verse 12 is also important.

It says, You have done me no wrong. So he's going back to the past. He's going back to the early days of when Paul and the Galatian church met one another. And he can say to them, Remember that in the past, you are most definitely living a gospel-centered life.

[18:05] It was evident in the way that you treated me that Jesus had changed your hearts too. So he gives them some evidence that they could remember.

Verse 13, As you know, So it seems that we're never given the details, but it seems like Paul had some kind of serious illness that may very well have affected his eyesight that might perhaps even have left him disfigured because he says, Well, I could have been treated with contempt or scorn or made to be a figure of fun, but that's not how they treated him.

Rather, Verse 14, He was welcomed with honor.

He was welcomed like an angel or like Jesus because he brought the good news of Jesus to them. And they loved him for it and they served him because of it.

But something had changed. Verse 15, What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.

[19:34] So they loved and served Paul, not out of duty, but have a real sense of joy, even though it was difficult for them because they knew how much Jesus loved them.

Therefore, they loved Paul. They understood from the message that Paul brought that Jesus had come into the world to serve them. And so they were glad to serve Paul.

They heard about a Jesus who had suffered to save them. Therefore, they were willing to endure suffering in order to serve Paul. They would have torn out their eyes for him.

They would have done anything for him in response to the sacrifice of Jesus that he'd come to tell them about. Paul came suffering as a servant of the Lord Jesus and he brought them a message of the suffering Savior.

There is a connection there. And that connection was then lived out in the lives of the church in Galatia because they were willing to suffer in order to live out this message of grace that they've come to believe in.

[20:43] But now that they've moved away from the gospel of grace, now that they're listening to false teachers who are saying it's all about law and law and law, verse 16, have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

Now they're treating Paul differently. Now the barriers are going up again. Now they're unwilling to hear God's truth from Paul. And so Paul, as their pastor, pleads with them, imitate me in making Jesus the center of your life.

Imitate me in letting his example become your way of life. He's calling them to the kind of gospel apprenticeship that they would have seen from him.

We know how an apprenticeship works. You have somebody who is senior who knows the job well and you have someone who's junior and they're there alongside them to learn. So there is a process of listening and watching and learning and copying and reflecting and Paul is encouraging them to that kind of life.

He's encouraging them to remember what we believe should inform how we behave. So if Jesus is willing to forgive me, then I must be willing to forgive others.

[22:09] If Jesus spoke truth and not lies, then I must be willing to resist gossip and rumor and half-truth. If Jesus held nothing back to be the suffering servant who would die to save me in love, then I must be willing to suffer loss to serve others.

Paul had given them that pattern of life and he wants them to return to that kind of life. There's a challenge for us in verse 12.

Because on one level, you know, we can understand and appreciate, here's an apostle saying to a church, become like me. But there is a sense in which every Christian should have that kind of faith that we can say to another, become like me in the way that I follow Jesus.

Let me help you, let me teach you, let me train you how to live for Jesus, to live out your faith. And that's a challenge for us, first of all, because it requires a faith that is real, a faith that is growing, a faith that is visible.

It requires relationships that are open, where we have to make ourselves vulnerable so people can see how we live out our faith. And that's difficult for us.

[23 : 33] It's the kind of thing that we do in a family, I think, instinctively. You know, we say to our children when they're trying to learn a new skill, well, watch me do it first and then try and copy.

Or we try and help our children to reflect on how things have gone in their day, how they've responded to challenges. How should you have acted in that situation? Okay, you made this choice. What would have happened if you made this kind of choice? So we do it in a family. We're discipling our children. We're training them up to live well in the world.

And we pray that we're training them to follow Jesus Christ as Savior. But that kind of show and tell quality that we have in our families should be true of all of our disciple making.

And so there is a challenge for us. Here is Paul saying, you can imitate me. You saw the way that I live. But all of us are called to have that kind of gospel-centered life also.

[24 : 34] The last section that we're going to look at this morning, verses 17 to 20, Paul here as pastor is calling them to choose to become more like Jesus.

In almost every section that we've been looking at, we're reminded that the underlying this letter is the problem of false teachers. Those who are coming in and bringing a different message, claiming that unless a person becomes Jewish, essentially, they cannot be saved.

It's causing problems. How does Paul feel? Verse 19. He calls them, my dear children.

And he picks up the imagery of motherhood. Here is Paul, and he's saying, he's like a mom. He's worried for kids that are making bad choices.

Maybe some of you, you know this. You know what it is to have sleepless nights or to have that kind of sense of heartache because you're desperately worried for one of your children.

[25 : 47] He says, my dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you. One image for Paul to use. Paul the apostle.

He says, I'm like a pregnant woman enduring labor pains because I'm desperate. Just like a mom is desperate for the baby to arrive and to live and to breathe and to grow independently.

Paul is saying, I'm desperate that you'll live out your freedom in Christ, that Jesus will be formed in you. He's concerned for them.

He's distressed for them because they're being pulled away from that. Pulled away because the misplaced zeal and devotion and commitment of the false teachers.

So verse 17. Those people are zealous to win you over but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us so that you may be zealous for them.

[26 : 47] So it seems like these false teachers are coming and they're bringing the kind of message that obviously they wanted to hear. A very pleasing man-centered message because they are zealous.

They're devoted to gaining followers. They're devoted to pulling this church away from Paul and away from Paul's message. They're therefore devoted to pulling this church away from trusting in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation.

So they're devoted in effect to pulling them out of freedom to drag them back into slavery. And when you look at how Paul speaks the difference between the false teachers and Paul is clear. These teachers are zealous. They're devoted. They're committed. They're dedicated. Yes. But to the wrong things and in the wrong way.

They're in effect saying to the Christians become like us. Not become like Jesus. Become like us. Paul says there's absolutely nothing wrong with being zealous.

[27 : 55] Just be zealous for the right thing. So sometimes people will say, you know, you're a Christian. You're a fundamentalist. As if to be fundamental about anything is a bad thing.

But Paul is saying having fundamentals is a good thing if your fundamentals are tied up to your identity in the Lord Jesus Christ. If our fundamental is I want to follow the Jesus who loved the outsider, who cared for the poor and the weak and the needy.

If my fundamental is I want to be humble and serve people like Jesus then that's a good thing for us. It's a good thing for our church. It's a good thing for our society. So there's nothing wrong with being fundamental.

It just depends what they are. So for Paul he's distressed because these false teachers are zealous that the people would become like them whereas Paul is desperate for what?

I'm in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you. He's desperate for them to become like Jesus to grow in the likeness of Christ. Here is in a nutshell I think a pastor's heartbeat to see people in churches make spiritual progress to grow to enjoy their privilege in the Lord Jesus Christ to persevere in faith and to mature in faith to see Christ formed in people.

[29 : 27] John Calvin puts it well if ministers wish to do any good let them labor to form Christ not themselves in their hearers.

Let me say as your pastor I get this. The times where I stop and reflect on the last few months or the last year without fail that the cause of joy is always reflecting and seeing how people are growing to be more like Jesus.

Seeing how people are walking with God and enjoying their faith but then the opposite what causes sorrow and discouragement is to see people grow cold is to see people walk away because the desire of a pastor the desire of Paul is to see the image of Christ in others.

So my regular prayer every week every day pray different things for the church but my regular prayer for us as a church is that we would know joy in Jesus as we follow Jesus together that we would love to read the Bible but it wouldn't just be like a dull thing that we have to do we'd have joy because we get to discover more of the glory of God as we read in his word that we would love to be praying together again not just as a routine but because we have access to our Father in heaven the one who loves us that we'd be sharing together about Jesus how we're growing in our faith sharing our struggle sharing our fear sharing our joy that we'd be serving our communities together speaking to people about Jesus that's my prayer what amazing prayer this one would be this prayer to turn this into a prayer these words of Paul that we'd be praying for one another to see Christ formed in each other in ourselves first but also in one another to see Christ formed in the people that we love and what a wonderful aim to devote our lives to lots of things pulling on our time and our energy but to be devoted to knowing

Jesus and to becoming more and more like him so let me invite you to reflect on these words of Paul to think for yourselves am I choosing to enjoy freedom in Christ is the gospel is the good news of Jesus what shapes and directs my life do I want to become more like Jesus day by day you