

# Satisfying Grace

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, if you would take your Bibles out and turn to Galatians chapter 4 on page 178. I think we need a change of pace this week.

Last week we covered a huge amount of territory and I think it was far too much for any single congregation to digest and I don't want to be guilty of giving anyone spiritual indigestion.

So today we're just going to look at one verse only and it's Galatians 4.19 where the Apostle Paul says, My little children with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you.

It's a fantastic verse. It takes us to the heart of what the Apostle is trying to do with these beloved Galatians and it is the most, I think, comprehensive picture of the Christian life.

I don't think you could find a better statement of what it means to be a Christian, a growing Christian. This tells us what we're meant to be on about here as a church and individually. Here is God's will for you and for me and for every member of our families that Christ Jesus be formed in each of us.

[ 1 : 19 ] My little children, my dear children with whom I am again in labor until Christ be formed in you. And there are two very simple lessons from the verse.

The first one has to do with transformation and the second has to do with how we are transformed. Let's look firstly at the transformation. The Apostle Paul, and this is very alarming to all women who've had children, says that he is in labor for the second time with the one child.

Just think about that. All his energy and all his labor and all his prayers and the reason he's writing this letter is so that Christ would be formed in these dear Galatians.

What is behind his thinking? What is it that he is desiring? It's that each of those whom he loves and longs for in Galatia might be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ.

That Jesus himself would grow in them in such a way that the other people in Galatia, Christian and non-Christian, who look at them don't see them and say, you are such a great person.

[ 2 : 28 ] But they actually see the living Jesus Christ who is in heaven now through them. Isn't that amazing? You see, Paul is not content with a decision for Jesus.

He's not content with conversion. He's not content with orthodoxy. The purpose of his ministry is not to bring us to the place of baptism or to bring us into church membership. It's not even just to create loving and kindly people who are gracious and wise and sophisticated.

Here is the one purpose of apostolic ministry and the one purpose of our lives. It is that they should become like Christ. It's that God should so transform them that they would be obviously like Jesus Christ be formed in them.

And I hope you can see what an absolutely ridiculously impossible goal that is, humanly speaking. That our very will and character and affections be transformed within us so that we reflect and take on the form of Jesus himself.

He's not talking about an external thing. This is not about the shell or the exterior. This word form, that Christ be formed in you, has to do with the essential inner person.

[ 3 : 44 ] Remember in the book of Philipians, Paul's trying to describe Jesus before he came to earth as a human baby. He's trying to say he was absolutely and totally and utterly God.

In the Greek he says he was in form God. And then when Jesus became a baby at Bethlehem, he says he took on the form, same word, of the servant.

So when Paul says that Christ be formed in you, he's talking about our inner selves, our real who you are. And it does not happen automatically and it doesn't happen by law or by religious exercises.

It is a genuine inner transformation where God by his Holy Spirit makes us more like Jesus gradually. And that is what you and I are meant to be on about.

That day by day, we more and more reflect the person of Jesus Christ. I think it's somewhat encouraging, isn't it, that Paul should say this to these Galatians.

[ 4 : 48 ] You know, after all their troubles, he doesn't write off their previous experience. He doesn't deny their previous faith and say, oh, it was useless. He says, you began to experience this transformation.

But a new teaching, a new gospel had come along. And you know what it had done? As every new gospel does. It had begun to deface the image of Jesus Christ in them.

And now the apostle is again in labor so that the image of Christ might be restored in all its glory.

Last week, I think we came to a turning point in the book of Galatians.

Until 4.6, Paul has really been talking about what Christ does for us, the objective work of Christ.

But in chapter 4, verse 6, there's a change and he begins to talk about Christ's work in us.

Just look down there at verse 6 of chapter 4. I remind you. He says, because you are sons, daughters, children of God, God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father.

[ 6 : 00 ] I said last week, this is the fulfillment of all of God's purposes and plans since creation, to come and dwell within us. This is, I can't tell you how radical this is.

I mean, every other religious leader says, do what I say, but don't be like me. I'm a weak person, follow my teaching. But Jesus Christ, who died for us and has risen from the dead and now sits in heaven, in another act of stunning humility and stunning grace, comes and dwells within each of us so that we become transformed increasingly.

so that our faces should reflect his face. Not just his grace, but him, him. And when the spirit of Christ comes into our hearts, he doesn't leave us where he found us.

He begins a mighty work of gradual renovation. It's like an extreme spiritual makeover. And all those things that claim our first allegiance, you know what?

They have to be brought out into the presence of Jesus Christ. This is the process of transformation. As soon as we realize that we have been serving an idol, what we need to do is we need to bring that idol out into the light of day and look at it in the light of Jesus Christ.

[ 7 : 25 ] We have to bring it into the face of Jesus Christ and realize when you make a comparison what a shabby and shameful thing that idol is. The idol didn't create us.

The idol didn't die for us. The idol can't give us salvation. All the idol does is it keeps me focused on myself and makes me bored and anxious and cynical.

And all the old idols that cling to the dark corners of our lives are gradually brought out and faced and replaced by the person of Jesus Christ.

That is the life of crying Abba Father. It's a life of growth and transformation and repentance where we become like Jesus Christ.

And this is how it works. We become like the thing that we worship. We are formed by the thing that we worship.

[ 8 : 23 ] Think with me for just a moment. Behind any flaw or any brokenness or any disobedience in our lives is in the end an idol. Whether it's bitterness or greed or boredom or selfishness something has taken the place of Jesus Christ.

And when we blow it we need to ask ourselves what is it that I have in the place of Jesus Christ?

What is it that's become so important to me that causes me to do it?

It's a much better question than saying I must not do that. I will not do that. I mustn't do it. A person in my position should never do that. Ask yourself what is it that's replaced the person of Jesus Christ?

A terrible story this week from France of a father, Christophe Javier who has been sentenced to eight years for killing someone. He had two children who were star tennis players and he became very ambitious for his children to reach their full potential as French tennis players.

And over a three year period as he took his children to their various tournaments you would have read this story he placed tranquilizers in the water bottles of the opponents so that they would lose.

[ 9 : 42 ] And one of the opponents who his son beat got into his car and drove home and fell asleep at the wheel and was tragically killed. And during the trial Javier said I did not think I was hurting anyone.

It's a very graphic picture of the way idolatry works. You see it replaces what is good and what is in perspective and what is right and what is true by something else which is good but then it comes to dominate.

Idols are usually something not wicked or malicious or evil in themselves they're usually something that's good in my life that I have elevated above the Lord Jesus Christ and now it's become the integrating focus for my life.

Very important. This process of transformation is a process where we bring our idols out in front of the Lord Jesus. Let me give you an illustration. Let's just say you are caught in bitterness.

Something's happened to you. You've been wronged and you just cannot seem to get past this bitterness. If I can't get past it the issue is not the fact that I've been wronged even though I have been.

[10:53] It's what my heart has made of that thing that I've lost. The thing that I've lost I've made into an idol which I have to have and I need to bring it out and I need to lay it in front of Jesus Christ.

And when I look at it in front of Jesus Christ I can say I don't need that thing. I have Jesus Christ and in Jesus I have more than all that I could possibly need. It's wonderful the way the apostle says this.

He says I'm working so that Christ be formed in you. It's the passive voice. It's not I form Christ in me.

It's not something that I do to myself. It's not something we do in a sense with one another. This is something that comes directly from God. It's completely and absolutely supernatural.

You can't fake what Jesus looks like. We don't make ourselves like him. It is the work of God. And that I think explains why it is that we as Christians, every Christian, has this sense from time to time that there is someone outside me who's working on me, giving me different ideas and desires that I never had before.

[12:08] Here is the comprehensive goal for each of us. This is what the Christian life is about. That we should be formed into the image of Jesus or that the image of Jesus be formed in us.

That's the first point. And my second point is, okay, then how do we do that? And the answer of verse 19 is through a very painful process. I just remind you.

My little children with whom I am again in childbirth, labor, travail until Christ be formed in you. Do you know the Greek word for travail is oh, de no.

And I looked it up in the dictionary, the Greek dictionaries, and they said the etymology is uncertain. The person who wrote that can never have been present at the birth of a child because I reckon that sound, oh, de no.

So, well, I'll leave that with you to decide. I want you to see, though, there's a deep tenderness from the Apostle.

[13:07] He calls them his dear children. He has said some very strong things in this letter which people in labor are wont to do from my own personal observation.

But the strongest things he says are not to the Galatians. It's about the false teachers. But to the Galatians he's deeply and affectionately concerned and bewildered. And he pictures himself again as a mother in labor for a second time over them.

Background's very simple, I remind you. When the Apostle first came to these towns in Galatia, he was a physical wreck. Do you remember how down the coast John Mark left the team?

They climbed the heights of the Galatian mountains and Paul fell seriously ill. He had some sort of fever and it gave him permanent eye damage. Just turn the page to 6, chapter 6, verse 11.

And this is one of the letters that Paul himself is writing by pen. He says, See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. Clearly the damage, he refers to it here, the damage he received through that fever gave him permanent eye damage.

[14:22] What a sight he must have been. You know, weak, sickly, stuff coming from his eyes. He is no Greek hero.

That's what he's referring to in verse 13. Look back at chapter 4. He says, You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to at first.

And though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God as Christ Jesus. Which just goes to demonstrate that the test of a ministry is not good looks or athletic physique.

Although, I have found that it's a great help in choosing stuff. You see what the New Testament constantly tells us, that the minister of the gospel can be ugly, sickly, with physical difficulties, or they can be a prime specimen.

It doesn't really matter. They can have a big personality and come in and dominate a room, or they can be someone who's shy and hates crowds. They can have impressive public gifts and all sorts of intellectual prowess, or they can be a faithful teacher of the gospel and teach God's word with simplicity and clarity.

[ 15 : 50 ] And I realise how ridiculous it is to say this on the North American continent, but our attitude to someone's teaching ought to have nothing to do with their outward appeal, with their pizzazz, with their technique, with their charisma, or the success that they've had.

But it ought to have to do with whether they are teaching faithfully the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are a culture that loves flattery. We've got to be very careful of this in our church.

We've got to avoid flattering those who are attractive and gifted. We need to honour those who are not impressive, but who are faithful. And we honour them, says the apostle, as though they were an angel of God.

Calvin said this in the 1500s, in this light, every true minister of Christ ought to be regarded. Godly teachers are divinely raised up to administer to us the most excellent of all blessings, the doctrine of eternal salvation.

They too are messengers of God by whose mouth God speaks to us. Or as Jesus said in Luke's gospel, he who hears you hears me, he who rejects you rejects me, and they don't reject just me, but the one who sent me.

[ 17 : 07 ] And that's what started to happen in Galatia. Something has gone terribly wrong. You see verse 15? What has become of the satisfaction that you felt?

I bear your witness that if possible you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. Another reference to his eye problems. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?

They, the false teacher, make much of you for no good purpose.

You see what he's saying? The first time he came to Galatia, he came with the truth of the gospel. They received him as an angel of God, as Jesus Christ. The second time he's come to them now with the truth of the gospel in the letter, they're treating him as an enemy.

Something has happened in between. Paul has not changed. They have now begun to follow a sophisticated gospel. The first time he went with the truth, the second time he comes with the truth, the first time he's honoured, the second time he's treated as an enemy.

Which means this, brothers and sisters, that you can be faithful to the gospel and you can tell the truth of the gospel and you can be loved and honoured and you can tell the truth and you can tell the truth and you can tell the gospel faithfully and you can be betrayed and hated by the same people who honoured you previously.

[ 18 : 27 ] Because Christian ministry is not about first impressions, it's about travail, labour, the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in us.

That's why every congregation and you as a congregation ought to pray that your pastors will continually tell you the truth of the gospel, that they will not be swayed by what you want, by your tastes and fashions, but by what pleases Christ so that Christ might be formed in them.

And if the pastor is faithful, if the Sunday school teacher or the person who works with the seniors care, if they are faithful with the gospel, receive them and honour them as the Lord.

And if they are unfaithful, rebuke them and do not listen to them. About once a year, this is a personal illustration, I have a conversation with the trustees called the under the bus conversation. It's where I say if I'm run over by a bus, what sort of person are you going to choose as a pastor of St. John's? And the central qualities that Paul says here is someone who has Christ formed in them and can so teach the gospel so that Christ might be formed in all of us.

[ 19 : 43 ] If that's not going to happen, we may as well pack it in. And I think that's why this picture of labour, of childbirth, is such a lovely picture. See, I cannot form Christ in myself.

It's not something I can control in you. And therefore, what should I do? Should I be passive? The answer is no. You know when you give birth to a child, it is a process.

And it's a process you are not in control of. But it's a process where you're not passive. You're working pretty hard. Well, that's my observation. But it's work unlike any other because it's purposeful and it's directed and there's a person in mind.

And it's not something you can start halfway through. Sorry, stop halfway through. So what is our responsibility? If God is forming Christ in us, what do we do?

And the answer is very simply, there are two things that we do. There is a two-sidedness to our response. And I just, I can illustrate this from any verse in Galatians, but let me go back to 2.20 to illustrate it.

[ 21 : 01 ] I was amazed this morning as we moved through morning prayer how often this two-sidedness is referred to in our prayers, in our confession, in the absolution. Very familiar verse 2.20.

I have been crucified with Christ. It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. Yes, there is a negative side. There is a putting to death. There is putting to death every idol which enslaves us. We are crucified with Christ. But having Christ formed in us is not just about that. There's also this other side, this side of delight and joy and positiveness. It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. Your true self is animated by your fellowship and friendship and communion with Jesus Christ from heaven.

And you and I are day by day to seek, to walk by the Spirit, to love what he loves and to choose what he chooses and to promote the interest of Jesus Christ. And every Christian, from time to time, looks at their life and just in amazement and they say, I couldn't possibly have done that.

[ 22 : 16 ] It must have been Christ within me. And this is who we are as a community. This is what it means to be a church of Jesus Christ. We're not like a community organisation.

We haven't gathered here together because we have the same sort of background. You know, we're not Celtic or don't share a taste in food and the arts. We're gathered around, we're a community that's gathered around the cross of Jesus Christ where the Holy Spirit has begun the transforming work in each one of us where he is forming Jesus in each single person in this community.

And that is why the church is a place of pain. transformation and growth and process. It's like a labour ward. Australian labour wards are very different than the Canadian wards.

Well, one I went to. All the rooms, the labour rooms, open into a central area. And that's where the fathers gather.

And we suffer our own form of pain, let me tell you. not enough work has been done on what fathers suffer through childbirth. It's a whole different story.

[ 23 : 29 ] But what we do is you cannot hide from each other the fact of what is going on in the different rooms. This is the great thing that's going on here.

You see, the apostle is saying to us what's really important here at St. John's is not our programs. It's not that we conduct flawless Anglican liturgies. It's not that we have good preaching.

It's not that we're accurately orthodox. It's not that we have attractive leaders. It's not that we have a classical style or a contemporary style or any of those things. But it is through all those things that Christ should be formed in each one of us.

The person sitting beside you and in front of you and behind you. And if you don't care about that then you don't love them. And so I finish by asking you this.

How are we doing with this? Are we a place where Christ is being formed in you? Are we finding ways to help one another with this?

[ 24 : 31 ] Are there things getting in the way of Christ being formed in us as a community? Are we open to this transforming process? Think about the most difficult thing in your life right now.

Is that a thing Christ is forming himself in you through? Or the thing that you're most looking forward to? The thing that gives you most delight? Is that something through which Christ is forming himself in you?

What do we need to do so that Christ be formed in us? We fly to Jesus. So let's kneel and pray. God bless save and pray.