

Gospel Ministry

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[0:00] Well, good morning, church. It's good to see you all this morning. Would you turn with me to! the book of Galatians chapter 4. We are looking at verses 8 through 20 today. That's page 915 in the Pew Bible. Galatians 4, verses 8 through 20. Let me pray as we come to God's Word. Father, what a wonderful mystery it is that you and your grace have made us one, one with you and one with each other.

Lord, as we come now to your life-giving Word, we ask that it would teach us, instruct us, encourage us, comfort us, lift our eyes to see you and the things of you more clearly so that we might live out this life that you've called us to live in a way that honors you. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

All right, Galatians 4, 8 through 20. Let me read this for us. Paul says, Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not God's.

But now that you have come to know God, or rather be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world whose slaves you want to be once more?

You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain. Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong.

[1:44] You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you 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. What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out.

That you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you. I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

Well, up until this point in the book of Galatians, we've seen a number of hats that Paul has worn, haven't we? We've seen Paul the theologian as he's expounded on the deep doctrines of the gospel.

We've seen Paul the biblical exegete as he's unfolded how the Scriptures fit together to hold up the gospel of Jesus Christ. But this passage today gives us a unique picture of Paul the pastor, Paul the shepherd. Paul is pouring out his heart in deep concern for the people he loves.

But, you know, passages like this, they aren't just about Paul, and they don't just apply to people who work in full-time ministry. What we know from the New Testament is that every member of the body of Christ is a minister.

[3:37] We are all called to build one another up in the faith. So, a passage like this that gives us a window into what gospel ministry meant for Paul, it helps us in our gospel ministry today.

Do you realize that you have a vital part to play in building the church, in helping others come to fullness in Christ? So, this passage is for you.

And we're going to look at three things about gospel ministry that we see in this passage. We're going to look at the message of gospel ministry, then we're going to look at the method of gospel

ministry, and then we're going to look at the goal of gospel ministry. So, let's look at each of those three things together. So, the first thing we see in this passage is the message of gospel ministry, the message. This is verses 8 through 11. And if we were to summarize the message in one word, I think that word would be freedom. The message of gospel ministry is a message of freedom. Now, where do we see that? Well, notice, we kind of see it by way of contrast.

Notice that Paul says in verse 8, he says, formerly before hearing and believing the gospel, you were what? Enslaved. And then in verse 9, he says, how could you want to leave the gospel and go back to being what? To being slaves.

In other words, the gospel brings freedom. Now, Paul starts in verse 8 by saying that the gospel message is a message of freedom from idolatry, right? Now that you've come to know the one true God, you don't have to live in the slavery of making money or sex or power or people your God. You don't have to get your life significance or meaning from those things.

[5:25] You don't have to be chained by those empty things that don't last and don't satisfy anymore. You know, because these things, right, they promise life, they promise happiness, but then they ask for more and more and more and more. But in return, they give less and less and less less. And the gospel says you can be free from that. You can know God, the true God. You can know the God who gives life and breath to everything and who will satisfy your soul and heal your heart because you were actually made for Him. Now, here's the thing, as we think about the freedom of a gospel message. I think most people may expect Christianity to be a message of freedom a little bit like that, right? Freedom from idolatry, freedom from lawlessness, freedom from immorality, like freedom from living for yourself and for the world. After all, that's sort of what we think religion's all about, right? It means stopping all the immoral things and then turning around and living a very moral and upright life. So that first kind of freedom sort of seems, yeah, we get that. But here's what makes the message of Christianity so unique. According to the New Testament, there are actually two ways to be a slave. There are actually two ways to be lost. One sort of slavery, one sort of lostness, yes, it looks very immoral, very worldly. It's full of idolatry. But the other sort of slavery is actually very outwardly moral and very religious. That's what we see here. Look at verse 9. Paul says to the

Galatians, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world whose slaves you want to be wants more? So Paul's very clear that these formerly pagan Galatian Christians are in danger now of leaving the gospel and returning to slavery. But how are they now in danger of returning to slavery? Are they being tempted to turn back to those same pagan idols that they used to serve, the gods of love and lust and war and sex and power and people and empire?

Are they going back to those old immoralities and lawlessnesses? No, that's actually not what's going on. On the surface, the Galatians are doing the exact opposite. They're actually trying to keep all the laws. They're trying to be very moral. But they're doing those things as if that's what's going to make them acceptable to God. Verse 10, Paul says, you're observing days and months and seasons and years. In other words, Paul's saying you're being persuaded to keep all those old prescriptions and regulations and calendars of the old Mosaic law. And Paul is here warning them and saying, look, if you are seeking justification by works of the law, that is tantamount to returning to the slavery of idolatry. If you turn from law breaking and just jump right into law keeping as your means of righteousness, as your means of identity before God, then you've fallen right back into slavery.

Because just like idolatry, legalism, works-based salvation, external religion, it will always ask for more and more and more. After all, how good is good enough?

How many of the laws do you need to keep? How well do you need to keep them? What level of sincerity do you need to practice them? To go from idolatry and immorality to external religion and works-based salvation to being very, very, very moral as if that's what's going to save you is just to go from one slavery to another. But friends, hear this. The message of gospel ministry is not stop being immoral and work harder at pleasing and knowing God.

[9:35] In fact, at the heart level, that kind of works-based salvation is really not very different from idolatry because when I live as if God's approval must be won through my performance, when I live as if God's blessing and favor must be kind of secured or held down by my efforts, when I ride that rollercoaster, then I'm functionally trying to be my own Savior, right? I'm acting as if I can cross the gap between myself and God, which is to say I'm acting as if I'm God enough to reach God, which is itself a form of idolatry. I'm putting myself in the place of God.

You know, it's sort of like watching old basketball reruns with your friend. You're watching old Chicago Bulls clips and Michael Jordan sort of doing his thing, shooting, scoring, winning championships, being the greatest of all time. He's doing his thing, right? Then your friend turns to you and says, I could do that. You look at your friend, you're like, who do you think you are? You're no MJ. There's no way that you could cross the gap between your lame game and his. You cannot be MJ enough to outgame MJ. But is it not then even more ridiculous to think that we could cross the infinite gap between ourselves as sinful human beings and the holy God, who, as George prayed so beautifully, dwells in an unapproachable light, to think that we could somehow be God enough to span the infinite moral distance between God and ourselves? But the message of Christianity, the message of gospel ministry, is freedom from all that legalism, which is just a covert form of idolatry. The message of gospel ministry is freedom from the hamster wheel of trying to perform and earn our way into God's favor. It's freedom from trying to be God. How? Because as the beginning of verse 9 says, the gospel is not just a message that we human beings can know God. It is not just a message that we human beings can know God.

I mean, nearly every religion, by the way, claims to be a way to know God, doesn't it? Whether it's the five pillars of Islam or the eightfold path of Buddhism, but the gospel isn't just a message that we humans can know God. Listen to what verse 9 says, now that you've come to know God, or rather, be known by God.

Christianity is not a message that says, here are the steps, here are the paths, here are the practices, so that you can climb the ladder and know God at the top. No. It's the message that God has actually come down and knows us intimately, savingly, covenantally. Just as there's a big difference between knowing about God and truly knowing God, there's a really, really big difference between saying, I know God and God knows me. And that's the message of gospel ministry. It's the freedom from both lawlessness and from legalism that comes when you can say, because of Christ, God knows me.

Now, I don't just know God as beautiful as that is, but I've come to be known by God. This is the freedom of a relationship of love, where the initiative is all God's, where God crosses the infinite gap between His holiness and your sinfulness in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, and where in Christ, God takes hold of you, and He takes responsibility for all your sins by dying on the cross, and He clothes you with His righteousness, so that now, because God knows you, you're actually no longer a slave. You're no longer a servant. You're no longer just trying to earn your place in the family of God, afraid that maybe one day you might sort of be let go when someone more suitable comes along, right? You're no longer a servant. Your place in God's family is no longer conditional on your performance, because now God knows you. You're a son. You're a daughter.

[14:32] And if you are His son, if you are His daughter, if you are known by God, then as Paul said in the passage we looked at last week, then you are heirs of His kingdom, and you're free. Free from the lawlessness of idolatry to live now for God and His holiness, and free from all the pride and anxiety of legalism to live now with God in joy.

Okay, so as we take up our gospel ministry as a church, how is it that we talk about this message that we have? What message do we actually share? Do we talk about it merely as a set of rules? Do this, don't do this. Here are the things that are really bad. Here are the things that are really good that you have to do. Or do we talk about it sort of as a bunch of spiritual practices? You have to come to church. You have to read your Bible. You have to do this, do that, take communion, get baptized, right? Or do we talk about a bunch of social goals and ways we want to change the culture, right? This policy, that program, this thing. Is that all we talk about?

Do we just present Christianity as if it's one more external legal code? Or do we proclaim the message as what it really is? A relationship with a living and true God, a relationship achieved and

secured wholly through the work of Jesus and not through our own. A whole new life and a whole new standing in life and in death whereby we can say not merely, I know God, but even more importantly, God knows me.

And of course, Christianity says there are good ways to live. There are good spiritual practices to take up. There are ways in which we want to love our neighbor, of course, but at the heart of it is that you've come to know God, or rather, be known by God. That's the message.

[16:43] Now, let's turn to the method. What's the method of gospel ministry? We have this incredible message to share, a message of freedom, a message of knowing and being known by God in Christ through God's own work and not our own. How do we go about sharing this message? Well, what we see in verses 12 through 16 of our passage is that the method of gospel ministry is love. The method is love.

In these verses, Paul reminds the Galatians of their former love for him, yes, but he also talks about his love for them. In verse 12, he says, brothers, sisters, I entreat you, become as I am, that is, live in the freedom of the gospel of grace, no longer bound by works of righteousness, right, by works of the law as a means of earning your favor with God. Become as I am. Why?

Because I also have become as you are. That is, Paul was willing to enter into the Galatians' life and their culture and to love them and to show compassion to them and to adopt their way of speaking and to listen to their interests and their loves. He was willing to enter their world with love. That's what gospel ministry looks like. And of course, ministry empowered by the gospel will always have this flexible and cross-cultural ease because we know in the gospel that it's not our culture that justifies us. The gospel tells us loud and clear that no one culture is any better than any other. God's not a God of favoritism. God's the God of Jews and Gentiles and all the other nations of the earth. So, when it comes to dress and forms of speech or the foods that we eat or the types of songs that we sing, these things are not what make us right with God.

They don't set us apart as somehow special in God's kingdom. And so, we're able to love people very, very different from us. We're able to adapt and be flexible and to show love across radical cultural difference. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul says, to those under the law, I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law. And then he says, to those outside the law, I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law. To the weak, I became weak, that I might win the weak.

I become all things to all people, that by all means, I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. The method of gospel ministry is genuine love that meets people where they're at with flexibility and kindness and compassion.

[19:46] John Stott in his commentary on Galatians puts it really clearly. He says, if we desire people to become one with us in Christian conviction and experience, we must first become one with them in Christian compassion.

So, brothers and sisters, how are you loving those to whom you hope to minister? Too often our human approach is to kind of despise or question others when they're different from us, right?

Rather than to love others first. But in Christ, we can love.

And notice how the Galatians responded to this love of Paul. Paul says his visit to them was because of a bodily ailment. Now, we don't know exactly what that ailment was, but apparently Paul got sick in some way on his missionary journey, and that's what sort of waylaid him in Galatia so that he could be there. But in God's providence, even that illness and that unplanned stop, as it were, was for the sake of advancing the gospel. And the Galatians didn't just receive the message, but they received Paul himself, sickness and all. And they received him with such favor and such gladness, Paul says, you would have taken out your own eyes and given them to me. Which, of course, just back, just like it is today in the first century, it was just a way of saying, you would have done anything for me, right? Now, there's a lesson here for us as we think about the Galatians' reception of Paul. You know, when we think about learning from others, when we think about having someone disciple us and minister to us and help us in the faith, you know, we shouldn't judge or dismiss them because of their appearance or because of their outward worldly success or their ability.

I mean, look at Paul. Paul was in rough shape when he landed in Galatia, right? But the Galatians didn't say, can't we get like a more successful or good-looking apostle? I mean, this guy showed up on death's door. Can we get like a Peter or a James or something? We get Paul and he's sick and we got to take care of him? No. What the Galatians valued wasn't Paul's appearance or style or outward success.

What they valued was the Word that he brought. He says, you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. As an apostle, Paul did speak with the authority of Jesus himself. He had that commission from the risen Christ, and that's what the Galatians valued. Not Paul's external strength or winsomeness or external appearance or his worldly standards of success. What they valued from Paul was the Word of Christ. Now, there aren't apostles today, but we do have the apostolic Word in Scripture.

[22:33] So what should matter to us today is likewise not external appearances. We shouldn't seek out a mentor or someone to disciple us just because they're outwardly successful or good-looking or have a big following on the internet or whatever. I mean, after all, that's going to be destroyed by AI anyway, right? So whatever. No. What should we seek out? We should seek out God's Word. As churches, we should be hungry for the Word of God, not the human polish or human appearances.

Oh, that we would be a church hungry for God's Word above all else. And that actually brings us back to the love that ought to be our method. Not only does love make us flexible to minister to others who are different from us, not only does love make us receptive to the ministry from others who are different from us, but love also, love also makes us bold to speak God's truth. In verse 16, Paul says, have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?

You see, under the influence of the false teachers, the Galatians' attitude towards Paul had begun to change. They no longer saw him as a friend, as a loving mentor, as an apostle. They started to see him as an enemy. Why? Because they began to dislike Paul's message. They began to reject his message.

They started to really like the message of the false teachers. Why? Because the false teachers made them feel really special, right? It was thrilling to think that they, as former pagans, could set themselves apart in a special way through keeping the law. They could find this special practice that was very ancient that made them a special class of Christians, not like those foolish people who believed Paul's gospel. No, they had the real insider knowledge now, the ancient ways of Moses and the law, and this puffed them up, and it set them at odds with Paul.

Paul was still willing to tell them the truth. Why? Because he was hard-nosed and hard-headed, right? Because his pride was at stake? No! Paul was willing to tell them the truth because he loved them.

[25:09] Love will compel us to tell them. Love will compel us to tell the truth, even when it's unpopular, even when it will make us seem like an enemy. Brothers and sisters, be thankful when you have an older Christian in your life who will tell you something that you don't want to hear.

Be thankful when someone loves you enough to tell you the truth, even though you might not like it at the time. What we need isn't mere affirmation. Is it a bad thing to be made much of? No, Paul says it's fine to be made much of for a good purpose. It's good to love people, build them up, affirm them, sure, but what we need isn't mere affirmation. We need the truth of God's Word because it's the truth that sets us free.

So don't be afraid to speak the truth in love. Of course, there are ways to do that well, right? We want to speak the truth in love, yes, but it's a failure, a failure of love to not speak the truth to one another in the family of God.

But imagine, imagine a community with me where there is both flexibility when it comes to cultural expression and human difference, but also absolute consistency when it comes to God's unchanging truth.

Imagine a community where there's kind of daring flexibility and bold consistency, all in love, right? Daring flexibility where the Word gives us freedom, bold consistency where the Word is clear, all in love. That's the method of gospel ministry.

[27:01] There it is. All right, last, let's consider the goal of gospel ministry. We see this in verses 17 through 20, and here Paul warns the

Galatians of the flattery of these false teachers and reaffirms his genuine love for them. But notice in this contrast that Paul and the false teachers have very different goals, don't they? Paul says the false teachers are making much of the Galatians. Why? So that they will make much of them. They want the Galatians to join their side to amplify their ministry and their significance, right? And of course, that is always how ministries work apart from the gospel.

Why? Because when you think that your acceptance with God is won through works, then ministry success will always be a gauge of whether or not you're succeeding with God.

You'll need to actually find that external affirmation to prove that you're okay, that you're getting it right, and ministry itself will become the work that you hope justifies you, that gives you that assurance. So you kind of need people to follow you and make much of you, to join your tribe, and to follow your teaching. Now, that is how nearly every cult and false ministry works. They make much of you so that you make much of them. But even genuine gospel ministries can struggle with making ministry success a gauge of God's favor. We can be tempted to make ministry success our identity too, and to forget the truth of the gospel. But notice, notice how different true gospel ministry is. What's the goal in gospel ministry? The goal isn't us or our glory. The goal is Christ in His glory. Paul says in verse 19, my little children, for whom I'm again in the anguish of childbirth, until Christ is formed in you. Christ formed in you. That's the goal of gospel ministry. Do you see how different that is?

The false teachers came along and said, okay, here's how you can literally form yourself through circumcision so that you can get into Christ. Ouch, right? Paul says, no, it's just the opposite. We long for Christ to be formed in you. That's the goal. Not you conforming to Him, but Him coming inside of you. Real, inside out spiritual formation of the life of Christ in you, in me, in us.

[29:51] That's the goal of gospel ministry. It's not about exalting a particular person or a particular church or a particular ministry fad. No, it's always about Christ in you.

You becoming more like Jesus from the inside out so that Jesus gets more and more glory and so that you live more and more in joy and freedom.

The Galatians had tasted that. Verse 15, Paul says, what then has become of your blessedness, Paul asks. That joy, that freedom, that blessedness of resting in the gospel of grace, of saying, God knows me, yes, me, a sinner, and He loves me. And knowing that Christ is being formed in you, a new creation, that is blessedness. Now, if that is our goal, Christ formed in you, if that's our goal, well, then that ultimately means, right, it means that we can't force spiritual formation, can we?

Parents, you can't make your children into Christians. Husbands, wives, you can't force your spouse to change. Do we want Christ to be formed more and more in our children, in our spouses, in our communities, in our neighbors, in our roommates? Yes! We absolutely should.

But we can't force it. We can't manufacture it. So what should we do? Well, ultimately, we can love, and we can speak the truth in love, and we can pray.

[31:38] There will be seasons of anguish. Listen to Paul's language in these paragraphs. He says, I'm perplexed. I'm in anguish. I'm afraid. I mean, that sort of describes the emotional state of a lot of parents when they think about their children, or a lot of us, and we love our neighbors, right?

Our hearts break for them, and Paul's not afraid to show his emotions in his heart. But ultimately, God must do this work, and that means we really must pray.

The most important work of spiritual formation, if we really believe that the goal of gospel ministry is Christ formed in us, is prayer. Parents, pray for your children. Wives, husbands, pray for your spouses. Don't just pray that they'll be nice or easy to live with. Don't pray that your kids will just be, like, obedient, so they stop bugging you all the time, right? That's fine.

But pray that Christ will be formed in them. That's true for our fellow church members, too. During the week, pray for your small group. Pray for the people you sit next to on Sundays. Pray that Christ will be formed in us.

That's what matters most. That's what we long to see. As Paul puts it in Colossians, what we want is Christ in us, the hope of glory. Or as Paul said earlier in Galatians, 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, gave Himself for me.

[33:18] So then our message is freedom, and our message is love, and our goal is Christ. Christ, that's gospel ministry. Are you taking your place in this great work?

It's not just for apostles. It's not just for pastors or elders or ministry staff. It's not just for deacons or small group leaders. This is the ministry of the whole body of Christ. When each part, when each member is working properly, we build ourselves up and grow into full maturity into Christ who is our head. We have to do it together. That's the design.

Are you wondering where to start? Well, start where you are. Start where you are. Start with your small group. Start with your household. Start with your roommates, the people in your college ministry. Start easy. You know, you can take someone to lunch and ask how you can be praying for them.

Listen to what's going on in their life. Share a Bible verse you've been encouraged by. This doesn't need to be difficult or complicated. Or, you know, maybe you could take a further step after that. You can maybe plan to meet three or four times together and read a book of the Bible together. What if you agreed to meet with someone four times, and each time you would discuss a chapter from the book of Philippians? And here's a simple way to make that discussion fruitful. Before each meeting, you'd read the chapter, and you'd highlight for yourself one verse that stood out to you.

[34:54] You could draw a little light bulb next to that one. And then you can maybe highlight one question that you had. You could put a little question mark there. And then you could highlight one area of application to your life, one place where you feel like God's Word's really prompting you to take on a new attitude or a new action or a new way or something that's really been encouraging you, something that's applicable to your life. You could put an arrow there. And then when you meet, you just share those things. You share your light bulbs. You share your question marks. You share your arrows. And you have a really rich conversation about God's Word at work in you and in one another.

And then you pray. Is that hard? Anybody can do that, right? We can all be doing this work. So where will you begin? Where will you begin, friends? What if there was a whole culture of mutual discipleship at Trinity, right, where younger Christians were hungry to be discipled by older Christians, and older Christians actively sought out and discipled younger Christians, and where mutual encouragement and discipleship was happening as well? What if Trinity was that kind of place where more and more Christ was being formed in us through this flexible, prayerful, loving ministry of the truth of God's Word? Oh, I think a church like that wouldn't just impact our city, but even more, it would bring much glory to Christ as His life in us and among us makes us more fully alive. Let's pray together.

Father, thank You that You have acted so decisively and definitively in Christ that we can now not just say that we know You as wonderful and as awe-inspiring as that is, but that You know us. Lord, in all of our callings this week, whether it be mutual ministry with one another, or whether it be our jobs, or our workplaces, or our school, Lord, whatever it is, Lord, help us to go forth in the freedom that You know us. You know us fully and completely in Christ, and we are secure in You in life and in death. Pray this in Jesus' mighty name. Amen.