

BECOME AS I AM!
PART 3

Text: Galatians 4:12-20

April 3, 2011

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

Out of fear for the Galatians' standing before God (v. 11), Paul pleads with the Galatians to become as he is: free from the Mosaic Law (v. 12a; cf. 5:1, a "Do this and live" covenant). To motivate them to do so, he presents two sets of contrasting attitudes. First, he contrasts the Galatians' previous attitude toward him with their present attitude (vv. 12b-16). Second, he contrasts his Christ-centered attitude with the Judaizers' self-centered attitude toward the Galatians (vv. 17-20).

I. THE GALATIANS' PREVIOUS ATTITUDE TOWARD PAUL SIGNIFIED THEIR ACCEPTANCE OF CHRIST AND THE GOSPEL. VV. 12B-16

When Paul first visited Galatia, the Galatians gave him a warm reception.

Paul begins at the end of v. 12 by saying, "You did me no wrong." At the beginning, the Galatians found no fault with Paul or his gospel of grace and freedom. Previously, instead of treating Paul unjustly, they welcomed him despite a debilitating illness he had at the time. Rather than giving into the temptation to treat Paul as one who was demon-possessed or under divine judgment, the Galatians welcomed Paul as a true "messenger of God, as Christ Jesus Himself" (v. 14c).

We saw that the reason the Galatians received Paul so warmly was due to the working of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:1-5, 14). In 2 Corinthians 3:8, Paul calls the gospel the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes the presence of Christ and fellowship with Him and the Father a reality through the gospel (Gal. 4:6).

And so we saw how Paul is driving home the point that the Galatians' initial reception of him (i.e., the gospel and Christ) signified the Holy Spirit at work within them. Despite his illness they did not despise or loathe Paul but rather recognized by the work of the Holy Spirit that it was Christ speaking through him.

REFLECTION:

Embedded in Paul's description of the Galatians' initial reception are some valuable lessons for us to take note of. Thus, before moving forward, we need to pause and give attention to the following three insights.

1. THOSE WHO ARE FREE DESIRE FOR OTHERS TO BE FREE.

Paul's passionate appeal wasn't an egotistical, self-exalting request, (e.g., "Be like me!").

Rather, Paul was so gripped by the truth of the gospel and the freedom it had brought him, he desired for the Galatians to become like him (i.e., free!).

He wanted them to know the fundamental blessing of the gospel (i.e., justification, 2:16) and the highest privilege of the gospel (i.e., adoption as sons, 4:1-7). He wanted them to know the joy of being known by God (i.e., being the recipient of undeserved, divine favor; Gal. 4:8-11)!

Paul, more than most of his fellow Jews, understood what it was like to live under the soul crushing weight of legalism (cf. Gal. 1:13-16). He knew what it was like to “grind his teeth” under a “do this and live” covenant relationship with God. He had come to know the tyranny and vanity of trying to earn God’s favor/salvation by keeping rules, regulations and rituals.

In contrast to this burdensome bondage, he had come to know the freedom and joy of the truth of the gospel. And so Paul deeply longed for the Galatians to become like him because he, even though a Jew, had become like the Galatians (i.e., free from the law!). Therefore, if Paul, who was a Jew, didn’t submit to the Mosaic Law, then it certainly made no sense for the Galatians (i.e., Gentiles) to live like the Jews and submit to old covenant regulations and requirements.

Paul was fearful of their status before God (4:11). Thus, he fervently pleads for them to abandon the false gospel of the Judaizers and to live in the freedom of Christ as he was doing.

2. OUR WEAKNESS IS NOT AN OBSTACLE TO THE GOSPEL BUT RATHER ITS OCCASION.

Paul didn’t enjoy weakness and suffering. He pleaded with God to remove his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:8). But in God’s wisdom and providence, Paul’s weaknesses (not his revelations) would be the platform for perfecting and demonstrating the Lord’s power (see *ESV Study Bible Notes* on 2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Gordon Fee points out in his book, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God*, that the believer’s life is lived in the “radical middle” (p. 140). He writes that the Christian life is lived in the midst of all kinds of present weaknesses, knowing the power of the Spirit, who especially comes to our aid in prayer (p. 140).

For Paul, the Spirit’s presence meant not only works of great power (Gal. 3:5), which gave proof that salvation in Christ is based on faith rather than observance of the Mosaic Law, but also power for effective proclamation of Christ in bringing about conversions despite the obvious weakness of the messenger (1 Thess. 1:5-6; 1 Cor. 2:1-5; 2 Cor. 12:7-10).

What we see in Paul’s visit to Galatia is that in God’s providence, his sickness served as the occasion for his preaching of the gospel to the Galatians. His weakness was not an

obstacle to the gospel but rather its occasion, “it was *because of a bodily ailment* that I preached the gospel to you at first” (4:13).

God used Paul’s illness as the occasion for bringing the gospel of freedom to the Galatians. This has certainly been the case in my life. It was through losing my voice in October 2000 that the Lord brought me to an explicit, self-conscious awareness of my need for the gospel as a believer. Charles Spurgeon, in a sermon entitled, “Rough but Friendly,” stated, “Child of God, thou art as dependant today upon the bounty of heaven, as at thy first conversion. A babe in grace is not more dependent upon God than the mature and venerable Christian” (p. 667).

Though I didn’t enjoy getting a debilitating vocal disorder, God has used it to achieve His purposes by making it the occasion for reaching others with the gospel of Christian freedom. The Lord in His providential wisdom has used my vocal struggles to show that His power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9).

Paul writing to the Corinthian church said, “³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:3-5).

3. PASTORS SHOULD NOT BE ASSESSED BY WORLDLY STANDARDS.

Because of his bodily ailment, when Paul first came among the Galatians, he came without show, without pretence, without worldly honor or rank, without anything that could gain him respect or estimation in the eyes of men (see *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 127). Philip Ryken writes,

“Ministers should not be judged by their ability, appearance, personality, popularity, or any other standards ordinarily used to judge them. Ministers should be evaluated primarily by their faithfulness to the Word of God. If they are faithful, then to welcome their message is to welcome Christ Himself” (*Galatians*, p. 175).

The crucial assessment for a pastor is whether he preaches the Word of God accurately and faithfully (2 Tim. 4:1-2). The character of a true servant of Christ is displayed in his faithfully conveying God’s pure Word (2 Tim. 2:15; 4:1-5). This raises a very important yet often overlooked question: *What is the Word of God?*

Zacharias Ursinus, author of the Heidelberg Catechism writes,

“...the law and gospel are the chief and general divisions of the holy scriptures, and comprise the entire doctrine comprehended therein. 2. Christ himself makes this division of the doctrine which he will have preached in his name, when he says, “Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached

in his name” (Lk. 24:46-47)...this embraces the entire substance of the law and gospel” (*Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, p. 2).

The distinction between law and gospel is not a superimposed idea upon the text of Scripture but rather as Ursinus shows this distinction arises naturally from the text of Scripture itself.

The Reformers and their heirs recognized that the distinction between the law and gospel resided at the heart of all true preaching, teaching, ministry and discipleship. Martin Luther said that making this distinction clearly is the highest and most difficult mark of a sound preacher. He wrote, “...place the man who is able nicely to divorce the Law from the Gospel at the head of the list and call him a Doctor of Holy Scripture, for without the Holy Spirit the attainment of this differentiating is impossible” (*What Luther Says*, p. 732).

Theodore Beza, John Calvin’s friend and successor in Geneva wrote, “We must pay great attention to these things. For, with good reason, we can say that ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the principle sources of the abuses which corrupted and still corrupt Christianity” (*The Christian Faith*, p. 41).

To be sure there are other qualifications for the office of elder (cf. 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) but if this one is missing none of the other ones matter.

One of the greatest needs in the church today is for pastors like Paul who possess a clear understanding of the distinction between the law and gospel. And, as a result, they are gripped by the centrality of the gospel and labor to form Christ, not themselves, in their hearers (4:19).

Mark Dever, in his book, *The Deliberate Church*, writes,

“The most important and fundamental role of the pastor is to preach the Gospel clearly. Whether your church is 6 months old or 60 years old, whether the pastor has 5 years or 50 years of experience, whether the church has 5 or 5000 members, preaching will always be primary because the church is distinguished from the world by living on every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4)” (p. 89).

Regardless of how impressive a man may appear or how large the ministry may be, if he is not faithfully and accurately committed to preaching the Word of God (law and gospel), he is not qualified for ministry.

One of the many reasons why the distinction between law and gospel is critical is so that we do not reduce God’s means of grace (i.e., his actions toward us; baptism and the Lord’s Supper) to our means of commitment or expressions of piety and personal holiness (see Michael Horton, “Law and Gospel,” *Modern Reformation*, March/April 2011, p. 56).

Maintaining a clear distinction between the law and gospel reminds us that in the public worship of the church, God's service has priority over our activity and actions. God's grace in Christ rather than our inner experiences or successes in sanctification become the basis of our confidence before God.

So, as we prepare to come to the Lord's Supper this morning, let us remember that these signs are given to us for assurance of His favor and of all His spiritual blessings!

Properly distinguishing the law and gospel reminds us that we come to the Lord's Table not as givers but receivers. We are coming to be served rather than to serve. The essence of the Christian faith and life is not measured by our devotion to Christ but rather His endless devotion to us!

We love Him because He first loved us! Woven throughout the story of the Bible is the thread of God's loyal devotion to His people. Psalm 136 celebrates it: "Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, *for His steadfast love endures forever*" (emphasis mine).

Through Jesus, God's steadfast love is given to us beyond measure! It is in Jesus that we most fully see the steadfast love of God (i.e., His unending loyal devotion and pursuit of us unworthy sinners!).

May we then pray to be like Paul and possess a clear understanding of the distinction between the law and gospel so that we may be gripped by the centrality of the gospel and labor to form Christ rather than ourselves in the lives of many (4:19).

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