

Don't Return to Spiritual Slavery

Galatians 4:8-20

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By Ryan perry

Scripture

Galatians 4:8–20

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[12] Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. [13] You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, [14] 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. [15] 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. [16] Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? [17] They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. [18] It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, [19] my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! [20] I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

Introduction

Illustration

About three weeks ago, my wife and I were looking for a show to watch, and we came across the show **Hoarders**. How many of you have ever seen this show? Well, if you haven't, there are currently 13 seasons available on Amazon Prime.

And every episode centers around 1 or 2 people who are dealing with a hoarding disorder.

If you don't know what that is, a hoarding disorder is when a person persistently finds it difficult, and at times impossible, to discard things, which leads to the accumulation of stuff within their living spaces.

Now, for some who deal with this issue, it might only be a slight problem that results in a little bit of clutter.

But for the people who end up on this show, the problem gets so out of control that every room in their house has been filled from top to bottom with stuff.

This leads to living conditions that are unsafe, unsanitary, embarrassing, isolating, and against most city codes. And if these people don't get help, they may lose family relationships, get seriously hurt, or the city might even kick them out of their homes.

So what the show does is bring in a psychologist, a team of cleaners, and some family and friends to help clean and declutter their home as they work through the issues that led to their hoarding disorder in the first place.

This usually ends up being a very difficult process for these people to go through. However, more often than not, the episode ends with a clean house, happy family and friends, and the person feeling like they have a new lease on life as they vow to never go back to their hoarding ways.

And yet, once the cameras are off and some time goes by, they forget how bad the problem was and how enslaved they were to their stuff. **And they begin to hoard again.**

Last week, as we walked through Galatians 3:27-4:7, we got to receive what I believe was a very refreshing and uplifting message. **That Christ set us free to be children of the Living God. And because we are his children, we are all one and equal in Christ, adopted by God through Christ, and are heirs of all God's promises.**

I know for me it felt like a balm or a salve as we've been walking through a book where God has been exposing all of the ways that we are putting our faith in other things besides Jesus. **It felt like a sweet moment where the storm clouds cleared, and I could finally see the blue sky of being a true son of my heavenly Father, my dad.**

And if I'm being honest, I wish I could capture the sense of joy and freedom that I felt after that message. **But unfortunately, that's not always how the human heart works.** Because I find that my mind and heart often drift away from my sonship to things in this world that can't give me any real hope, joy, or freedom.

Like the hoarder, I can, one minute, be in a place where it feels like Jesus has decluttered my heart, and I want nothing more than the life and joy that he provides. And then, in the next, I am once again trying to fill myself with things that will only lead to lifelessness, destruction, and death.

That is exactly why Paul wrote this letter to the Galatian churches. As a reminder, God, through the preaching of Barnabas and Paul, had freed these Gentiles from the slavery of pagan idol worship and made them his adopted children and heirs.

But when false teachers came in, they brought with them a different message. That salvation wasn't through faith in Christ alone, but instead was **through faith in Christ PLUS doing works of the law.**

And instead of holding on to the true gospel of Christ, the Galatians began to listen to these false teachers and live as if they needed to keep the law in order to be saved.

Now, up to this point in the letter, Paul has spent the majority of his time making a sound theological argument for why they are made right with God by faith alone in Christ alone apart from works.

And with it, he has done a great job of showing them that if they rely on works to save them, they will not find the freedom that Christ offers. Instead, they will be enslaved to sin and will be under the curse of God's judgment.

But now, in Galatians 4:8-20, he moves away from precise argumentation and instead pleads with them as a friend and spiritual parent to not return to the same slavery that they were in before Christ.

Because if they rely on works of the law to save them, they will re-clutter their hearts with something that can't give them the true joy and freedom that Christ offers. And, like their pagan worship before Christ, **it will only enslave them to sin and judgment.**

Now, as I have said before, most of us are not in danger of trying to earn our Salvation by following the Mosaic law. **However, I can imagine that some of you are struggling with a desire to clutter your heart, just like I do.**

[FCF] You've been set free by Christ, you know that you are a precious child of God, and in your mind, you agree that real life, joy, and freedom are only found in Jesus. And yet, you are struggling in your faith because your heart is full of fear, worry, and stress, as you find yourself searching for freedom and joy in other things besides him. **Like the Galatians, you are being tempted to return to things that once enslaved you.**

Therefore, we all need to hear Paul's pastoral and heartfelt plea today, which is this:

Main Point: Don't return to spiritual slavery, for Christ is the only one who gives lasting freedom and joy.

And as we unpack this plea today, we will see three things that will help protect us from returning to the former sins that once enslaved us, and will turn our hearts back to Christ as our only source of life, freedom, and joy.

So the first thing that Paul pleads for this morning is this:

1. Remember what God saved you from

Galatians 4:8-11

[8] Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. [9] But now that you have come to know God, or rather to 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? [10] You observe days and months and seasons and years! [11] I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

Illustration

One of the most amazing stats that I heard on the show Hoarders is that 90% of people who have a hoarding disorder, and go through a decluttering process, end up hoarding again. **90 percent!**

Now, we need to recognize that this condition is a true mental illness that can't simply be fixed by cleaning and decluttering a person's house. It takes intentional steps of care and therapy that help them get to the root of why they hoard, while also helping them to see how terrible their life was before the junk was gone, and how much better it is now that they are free of it.

Text

This is very similar to what Paul is doing in verses 8-11. He points the Galatians to their spiritual condition before Christ, and then contrasts it with their current state as a child of God.

He begins, in verse 8, by pointing out that they used to be enslaved to the worship of false gods. Like I said last week, they were trying to find acceptance and favor from idols of wood and metal that are not only fake gods but are also linked to demonic forces that enslaved them. Which means that they were held captive by their sin and were stuck on the road that leads to eternal judgment.

Mini-application

We need to recognize that this is where we all were before Christ. We were searching for happiness, favor, and a sense of freedom and fulfillment from false gods that couldn't save us. **And whether we realized it or not, we were on a path that was leading us right to God's judgment and an eternity apart from him, in hell.**

Text

But if that is who we were before Christ, **that isn't who we are now.** Because Paul tells the Galatians in verse 9 that **NOW**, they have come to **know God**, or rather (more importantly), **be KNOWN by God.**

And the reason he says it this way is to bring out two important truths. One, we now have an intimate relationship with the one true and living God. That is what the Greek word *ginosko* (**know/known**) means. We know God, and he knows us **in a deep and relational way.**

But then, second, we get to know God because he first knew us and chose us to be his people. **We came to be known by God.**

As Paul writes in Romans 8:29:

[29] For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Even though we were slaves to sin and death, God, out of the overflow of his mercy and love, chose us, and made us his children. **Which means that we can't do anything to earn our salvation because God has freely given it to us.**

And the reason they need this reminder is that they are beginning to abandon their adoption in Christ and are returning to a form of man-made and demonic worship that can't save them. As Paul says in Galatians 4:10-11:

[10] You observe days and months and seasons and years! [11] I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

They are beginning to observe Jewish rituals like the Sabbath, new moon rituals, Passover, and the year of Jubilee as a way to be made right with God.

And to Paul, this is no different than pagan worship. And if they don't return to the truth that they are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, it will enslave them. **Which means that it may become clear that they were never really believers to begin with, and that Paul's work among them may have been for nothing or in vain.**

Application

Now, the good news of Galatians is that Paul is still confident that they will return to the truth. This is why he continually calls them brothers and sisters in verse 12. **Likewise, I am confident that most of us are not in danger of completely rejecting Christ.**

And yet, what I am worried about is that we may end up missing out on the true freedom that Christ has bought for us with his blood. That we will say we are saved by grace alone and yet continue to live a life full of anxious toil, because in our hearts we are missing out on the full assurance, rest, and freedom that Christ supplies.

So I want to encourage all of us to fight this tendency by remembering what God saved us from. **He saved us from dead works that were leading all of us to hell, and by his grace, he freely chose us to be children of the One True King.**

Therefore, we don't have to live in fear and doubt, and we don't have to try so hard to make ourselves look good or put together for him or from anybody else. **Because nothing in all creation can separate us from the full love, acceptance, and freedom that is already ours through Christ.**

2. Return to the joy of your salvation

Illustration

One of the things that I remember from my childhood is the excitement I would feel every time a holiday would come. I would get excited about seeing family, playing with my cousins, eating good food, and, **if it was Christmas, getting presents. I mean, who doesn't love presents?!**

But that tends to change as we get older, doesn't it? The excitement that we felt as kids begins to fade as our lives fill with responsibilities and work. And if we're not careful, these holidays, which were meant to be filled with joy, can become nothing more than a lifeless burden, full of tasks that are a part of a never-ending list of things that need to be done.

Text

Similarly, Paul is hinting at this same idea. But instead of talking about the fading excitement of holidays, he is pointing the Galatians' to their joy in Christ.

Because they have lost their wonder and joy in Christ and have exchanged it for a form of lifeless law-keeping.

Therefore, Paul pleads with them to become like him, to live free from dead works that can't save them, and to return to the joy they had when they first believed.

As he writes in Galatians 4:12-16:

[12] Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. [13] You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, [14] 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. [15] What then has become of your blessedness (joyful and grateful spirit, NIV)? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. [16] Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?

Now, we don't know exactly what Paul's physical ailment was, but many believe it was an eye issue. This is backed by the fact that the Galatians were willing to gouge out their eyes for him, and in Galatians 6:11, Paul says that he is writing with large letters (probably because he can't see well).

But whatever the ailment, God in his providence made it bad enough so that Barnabas and Paul had to stop in Southern Galatia until it was at least a little bit better.

Because of this, they preached the good news of Christ crucified to these Gentiles, whose hearts were so ready to believe that they received Paul's words as if he were an angel or Jesus himself.

They were so radically converted to Christ that they didn't see Paul's condition as a burden because they were full of blessedness (verse 15), or, as the NIV says, **a joyful and grateful spirit.**

In fact, Paul and Barnabas were so overwhelmed by the radical conversion of the Gentiles in Southern Galatia that they couldn't wait to share the good news with their home church in Antioch. As Luke writes in Acts 14:27:

[27] And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

But now, their joy and freedom in Christ have faded and seem to be long gone. And in its place stands a lifeless man-made religion that no longer views Paul like a messenger from God, but as an enemy from the devil himself.

Application

Brothers and Sisters, this kind of spiritual fade is all too common in our spiritual lives. At the beginning of our Christianity, when we first come to truly understand and believe in Christ, **many of us were full of ecstatic joy**. We couldn't get enough of our Bibles, going to church, talking about Jesus, being in fellowship with other believers, praying, and learning about God. **We wanted to be immersed in Jesus 24/7.**

And then, something happened. We grew in our faith (**which is a good thing, by the way**), but as we grew, we also became so familiar with the Bible and the rhythms of our faith that it lost the same wonder that we used to have in those early years.

Now, yes, we still pray, we still read, we still go to church, and we still have fellowship, and **it's good and rich**. Yet, we can at times be missing the same heart-stirring joy that we had when we first believed.

And this can lead us to become stagnant and lukewarm in our faith, or it can turn our Christianity into nothing more than a checklist of rules to be done so that we are good with God.

Read my Bible, check. Pray a little, check. Go to church on Sunday, check. Talk about Jesus every once in a while, check. Give a little money, check. **And the list goes on and on.**

And all the while, we will have lost the wonder and joy of Christ, because we will begin to believe that our faith is more about what we do than who we worship.

So like Paul, I encourage each of us today, don't let your faith become a stagnant list of to-dos. **Rather, return to the joy and wonder of Christ and who he is for you. For he is our great God and Savior who powerfully redeemed us by his blood so that we can be children and heirs of our Heavenly Father, our God and King.**

This brings us to the last part of Paul's plea.

Listen to those who point you to Christ

Galatians 4:17-20

[17] They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. [18] It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, [19] my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! [20] I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

Illustration

How many of you have ever gotten a scam email or text that says something like this: **“We’ve identified you as a top candidate for our company. Contact us, and you could be on your way to making \$10,000 a month.”** Have you gotten that? I can’t count how many times I’ve received messages like that.

And the truth is that I know they are scams, and yet, in my heart, I still find myself thinking, “Oh man, someone thinks I’m qualified for this, maybe I should check it out.”

Which is so dumb because it’s merely fake flattery to swindle me into clicking on the link below, so they can more than likely steal my identity. **And yet, my heart falls for it because inwardly I want praise, flattery, and validation.**

Text

This is the exact thing that the Judaizers are doing to the Galatians. Paul says they are making much of them. This means that the Judaizers are flattering the Galatians and telling them how great they are.

Now, this can be a good thing if it's being done for a good reason (V. 18), but Paul knows that the Judaizers are like email scammers. They are flattering these new believers so they can accomplish their own evil and selfish goals.

Which includes:

- “Shutting them out.” This means they are trying to get the Galatians to cut ties with Paul and his message of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone.
- Wanting to gain followers and disciples to their Christ plus law-keeping ways.

In essence, these Judaizers want to be made much of by the Galatians, so they can gain followers, influence, and power in the church.

Mini-application

Which, by the way, have been the motives of almost every false teacher throughout the history of the church. **In general, when you find a false teacher, you will find a person who is hungry for power and influence.**

Text

And yet, Paul, on the other hand, is perplexed and is in anguish and pain, like a mother giving birth. Not because he wants followers or power, but because he wants them to experience the full freedom, joy, and life that is theirs through faith in Christ alone.

Which means that he is going to tell them the truth about who they **were before Christ**, who they **are in Christ**, and who they are **becoming by turning to the law**, even if they don’t like it.

Application

Church, I know that we've been through a lot over the past year and a half. I know that I have made a lot of mistakes as your pastor, and that we as elders have so many areas we can and want to improve upon.

And right or wrong, we fully understand that this has contributed to some choosing to leave our fellowship. So it wouldn't surprise me if you have peeked your head over the fence to look at another church to see if the grass is greener over there.

But I want you to know that despite our imperfections as leaders, we are committed to doing the good, but hard work of continually praying for you and pointing you to Jesus, even when it doesn't feel good. **Which means that we will always point you to the truth.**

Because, like Paul, we want nothing more than for the truth of Christ crucified and your adoption as God's children to de-clutter your heart and permeate every area of your life.

So that you would not live in your former slavery to dead works, or to things like fear, worry, and doubt. Instead, you would walk in the joy and freedom of your salvation.

Therefore, we, as your leaders, will never lie to you, we won't falsely flatter you, and we will never tell you something just to make you like us.

Instead, we will always show you the holiness of God, the reality of your sin, and your constant and continual need for a Savior. And we will labor in this task, like a parent, until Christ is fully formed in you.

And so we plead with you, don't return to spiritual slavery. Remember what you were saved from, return to the joy of your Salvation, and whether it is us or someone else, listen to those who are working to point you to Christ and Christ alone.

Let's Pray.