

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
February 12, 2017

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Lesson Text: Galatians 4:8-20
Lesson Title: Delivered from Bondage

Introduction

Having believed the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Galatian believers were enjoying new life in Christ. In Galatians 3, Paul described them as sons of God with all the rights and privileges of being in God's family. But the Galatians had a problem. They were yielding to the influence of a group of false teachers called Judaizers, men who were telling them they needed to keep the law of Moses to be saved and sanctified. They were moving in the wrong direction and Paul was fighting for their spiritual freedom.

In Galatians 4:1-7, Paul reinforced the truth of the believer's position and privilege in Christ without keeping the law of Moses. The Galatian Christians possessed the Holy Spirit (Galatians 3:1-5), the spirit of adoption (Rom. 8:15-17; Galatians 4:6), and they were no more servants, but sons (Galatians 4:7). Better still, they were also "heirs" of the promises to Abraham (Galatians 4:7).

In our lesson text, Paul changes his formal argument to a personal appeal for the Galatians not to return to spiritual bondage. Paul wants to fully expose the false teaching of the Judaizers and help the Galatian believers realize the foolishness of listening to those teaching law rather than grace. He appeals to their arrogance and their affection in hopes of accomplishing his purpose.

Paul's Appeal to their Arrogance (Galatians 4:8-11)

Verse 8

"Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods."

"Howbeit then" means "formerly, or at a previous time." Paul is speaking of the fact that prior to their salvation, when they "knew not God," the Galatians had been idolaters (Ephesians 4:17-19). "Ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods" means prior to being saved, the Galatians were slaves to idolatrous "gods." These "gods" the Galatians served were "no gods" or did not really exist. Paul was never hesitant to denounce pagan religions and pagan gods (Acts 17:16, 22-23).

Verse 9

“But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?”

Paul’s question is, “Now that you know the true God, or now that God knows you through saving faith, how could you follow any teaching that leads you back into spiritual bondage?” The Galatians were not actually returning to paganism. They were putting themselves under the law of Moses and while paganism and the law of Moses are certainly different, they are both systems of works and opposed to grace.

Notice how careful Paul is in his theology when he says, “after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God.” He refers to salvation as the time the Galatians first came to know Christ: “after that ye have known God.” But then he qualifies this statement by the words, “or rather are known of God.” Paul taught salvation was all of God through Christ. Salvation is by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8). The cause of salvation is grace; the means of salvation is faith.

“Turn” means “to revert or convert back.” The “weak and beggarly elements” refers to the things which offered no spiritual strength and were worthless. The laws and ceremonies of the Mosaic law were too weak to release sins bondage and not valuable enough to purchase pardon and eternal life. Why would the Galatians “desire” or prefer to live in bondage to the law when they could live in the liberty of grace?

Verse 10

“Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years.”

“Days, months, times, and years” were all part of the ceremonial laws of the Mosaic covenant (Leviticus 23:5, 16, 28; 25:4). No doubt Paul had taught the Galatians, as he did the Colossians, concerning observing days and times of the year (Colossians 2:16-17). The problem was not the Galatians observing the Sabbath or Jewish feast days, it was the fact they thought it gained them some spiritual favor with the Lord. Today Christians celebrate Christmas and Easter, but celebrating those days does not gain merit with the Lord.

Christians are free from the bondage of “days, months, times, and years.” We are not under the Sabbath law. If we were, we would keep Saturday which is the Sabbath, not Sunday. The New Testament does not teach the Sabbath has been switched to Sunday. Christians observe Sunday, the Lord’s Day, in memory of the resurrection. We do not meet to gain merit or favor with God.

We meet because Christ commands us to meet regularly as His church (John 20:19; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Hebrews 10:25).

Verse 11

“I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.”

Despite Paul’s teaching of grace and Christian liberty, the Galatians were listening to the Judaizers and moving away from freedom in Christ to bondage to the law. They were becoming slaves to things that did not matter. So, Paul says, “I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.” He feared his “labour” of preaching the gospel to them would be “in vain” if they continued to regress.

Paul’s Appeal to their Affection (Galatians 4:12-20)

Verse 12

“Brethren, I beseech you, be as I am; for I am as ye are: ye have not injured me at all.”

While Paul’s tone in verses 8-11 may have been somewhat abrasive, it changes in verses 12-20. He appeals to some of the special memories of the past in an endeavor to help them focus on the love which brought them together at the first. “Brethren” is the Greek word *adelphos*, meaning “born of the same womb.” Paul wanted the Galatians to think of him as one of themselves.

Based on their brotherly relationship in Christ, Paul urged the Galatian believers to “be as I am; for I am as ye are.” “Be” means “to become.” Paul is telling them there was a time in his life when, as a devout Jew, he observed all the ceremonies and rituals of the Mosaic law to which the Galatians were now reverting. Since salvation, Paul has a different understanding of the law and he wants the Galatians to share in his understanding. Legalism was no part of Paul’s faith and should not be a part of anyone’s faith.

“Ye have not injured me at all” means the Galatians had done Paul no personal wrong, but they did go against his apostolic authority by allowing the false teachers to lead them toward a works based salvation.

Verse 13-14

“Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first. And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus.”

When Paul first came to Galatia to preach the gospel, he suffered with a serious physical “infirmity.” We do not know exactly what his infirmity was, but the widely-accepted view is Paul suffered from some type of eye disease. If this is true, Paul’s eyes may have been red, swollen and unpleasant to look at. However, Paul’s repulsive appearance did not cause the Galatians to reject or despise him. They received him as a messenger of God, and a representative of Jesus Christ despite the fact his “flesh” or appearance was a visible “temptation” for them to “reject” him. Instead of rejecting him because of his repulsive appearance, the Galatians “received” Paul “as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus.”

Whatever Paul’s physical “infirmity” may have been and however repulsive it may have been, the Galatians accepted Paul as God’s man with the truth. He asks they do the same now as he writes exhorting them to avoid returning to spiritual bondage.

Verse 15

“Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me.”

When Paul asks, “Where is then the blessedness ye spake of,” he was saying there was a time when the Galatians would have done anything for him. They loved him and respected him so much they “would have plucked out” their “own eyes, and have given them” to him. Some commentators believe Paul’s reference to the Galatians given him their “own eyes” is further proof his infirmity was bad eyes. While that may be the case, the main thought here is the Galatians at one time would have made any sacrifice for Paul. Now, things have changed. That is what legalism does. It changes the way God’s people treat one another and respond to truth.

Verse 16

“Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?”

How could the Galatians love Paul so much they would have sacrificed anything for him and then view him as their “enemy?” Was it because he was telling them “the truth?” Paul, being faithful to teach the word of God, lovingly rebuked the Galatians when they started to drift into legalism and salvation by works. They were deserting the gospel of grace and falling back into bondage. When Paul faced them with the truth, they turned on him and he became their “enemy” instead of their beloved friend. These Galatians were spiritually shallow and did not want the Apostle’s authority or teaching because they were convicted in their own consciences. They were uncomfortable with truth. Grace became unpopular to the legalistic Galatians.

Note: People who reject “the truth” often view those preaching truth as their enemy (Isaiah 30:9-11). King Ahab viewed the prophet Elijah as his enemy when in actuality Elijah was the only friend he had (1 Kings 21:20).

Verse 17

“They zealously affect you, but not well; yea, they would exclude you, that ye might affect them.”

“They” and “them” is a reference to the false teachers. Paul points out the false teachers would go to any lengths and say anything to win the Galatians over to their way of thinking. The Judaizers, or legalists, were jealous of the Christian liberty Paul had preached to the Galatians. They “zealously” or warmly showed interest in the Galatians, “but not well” or literally, in a way which proved to not be good. Their motives were selfish and they only had their interest in mind.

The false teachers “excluded” the Galatians from fellowship because they were not as spiritual as those who mixed law and grace. Be careful with any teacher, preacher, or group of people who requires fellowship on the grounds of seeing things their way. It was dishonorable and sinful on the part of the Judaizers to lure the Galatians away from the gospel of grace.

Note: Legalists create their own little group. They build their own little kingdom. They work hard at building a ministry for themselves, but not for Christ.

Verse 18

“But it is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing, and not only when I am present with you.”

It is “good to be zealously affected” by ministries and messengers who are “in a good thing” or preaching truth. Paul wants them to pursue truth and be a part of everything preaching and proclaiming truth, even when he is not with them. Paul is not upset the Galatians are listening to other ministers. He is troubled they are listening to false teaching.

Verse 19-20

“My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you, I desire to be present with you now, and to change my voice; for I stand in doubt of you.”

“My little children” are words used by Paul to make his appeal to them more tender and compassionate. It is the only place in which Paul uses these words.

It is the language of a teacher toward disciples he dearly loved. Paul had “travailed in birth” or experienced the birth pains in leading the Galatians to Christ. He cherished them and loved them dearly.

Paul is once “travailing in birth...until Christ be formed” in the Galatians. He is again in labor with them, suffering all over again with the pains of worry, the work of prayer and the difficult effort of trying to reclaim them for the truth. He does not deny their salvation but their spiritual condition was so weak and immature that it was as though they had again become unborn children in their mother’s womb.

Paul’s goal for the Galatians was “Christ be formed in you.” That is God’s goal for each of us who are saved by grace. “Formed” does not refer to what the Galatians were doing for God, but rather what God was doing in the Galatians. The Galatians were objects of Christ’s work (2 Corinthians 3:18).

It was not enough for Paul to know the Galatians were in Christ. He wanted to “be present” with them and help them stay with truth. To be with them and “change his voice” means Paul wanted to speak to them in a kindly way. He needed to speak to them at length because though he believed them to be justified, to be saved, to be children of God, he says “I stand in doubt of you.” He had “doubts” or was perplexed concerning their spiritual state. He wanted to be with them and help them through this critical time.

Conclusion

By nature, Christians tend to return to the past when things get difficult or challenging. As the hymn writer says, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it.” For the Galatian believers, they were being led in the wrong direction. So are we if we attempt to live by man-made rules and good works. We must remember our salvation and justification is by grace through faith, not works.

Law and grace cannot mix! Professing to be saved by grace through faith and then live under the law or legalism results in spiritual defeat. To prevent that from happening, every true believer has the warnings of Scripture. May we heed the warnings of God’s Word and enjoy the reality of being delivered from bondage.

Amen.