



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Galatians 4: 8 -20

“Love’s Labors”

Galatians

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Thank you Mark and thank you for remembering who I am. I feel like I’ve been gone long enough to be forgotten but also thankful for Mark and for Frank Denison filling in the past couple of Sundays on short notice. I think I called Frank Saturday and he didn’t hesitate and I really appreciate it. And I know both of you gave very good ministry to the congregation and it’s a straight blessing to be able to draw on men on such short notice. I think I’m fine. I think my voice will hold out. I tested it Wednesday night when we had our first lesson in that series on the life of David and tested it again this morning at 8:30 and it held up and I trust it will do so this hour.

So we’re back in the book of Galatians and we’re going to look at verses chapter 4 verses 8 through 20. I’m going to just give you a very, very brief update or review of what we studied in the past few weeks. You know the problem with the Galatians was that they were moving toward the law. They were coming under the influence of a group of teachers called Judaizers, men who were introducing them to the law and telling them they needed to keep the law of Moses for their salvation and their sanctification, for justification and sanctification. And Paul has been countering that.

And in this past text that we looked at chapter 4, versus 1 through 7 he reminded them of their privileges and what they are as children of God. In fact in verse 7 he said “Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son and if a son then an heir through God.” Great privilege. We are heirs of a great inheritance. We’re children of God and he writes in verse 8. “However at that time when you did not know God

you were slaves to those which by nature are no Gods. But now that you have come to know God or rather to be known by God how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you that perhaps I have labored over you in vain. I beg of you brethren.

Become as I am for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time. And that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus himself. Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear witness that if possible you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth? I eagerly seek you, not commendably but they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them, that it is good always to be eagerly sought in a commendable manner and not only when I am present with you. My children with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone for I am perplexed about you.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his word and our time and study of it together. Let’s bow in prayer.

[Break in Audio]

The book of Galatians has been called a fighting epistle and that is well said. In it Paul fights like a warrior for the truth of the gospel but he also fights like a pastor for the souls of men. In fact the better analogy is that of a parent. He calls the Galatians “my children” in verse 19 of our passage and he writes to them with all of the concern of a mother who sees her child going down a path of self destruction. “I am again in labor” he says. So Paul, the great lion of God as Augustine called him, was also like the mother hen the Lord spoke of who wanted to gather he chicks under her wings for protection. The Galatians needed that.

They were being drawn away into the error of legalism. They were being taught that they needed to keep the law of Moses in order to be fully accepted by God. They were in the process of exchanging truth for error, the gospel for another gospel which is not another. They were in danger of apostasy and Paul was deeply concerned. He has forcefully argued from scripture for the gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone and Christ alone and he has reasoned with them from their own experience

reminding them that they originally receive the Holy Spirit apart from the law. So they had everything. They didn’t need the law to gain anything more.

Now in Chapter 4, versus 8 through 20 Paul again recalls their past experience in order to direct them back onto the right path. It reminds them of the great deliverance they had when they first believed and the joy that they had experienced but how they had lost that joy by turning from grace to law. They weren’t going forward into a fuller relationship with the Lord. They were going backwards into slavery. They were abandoning their liberty as sons and heirs of God for bondage.

In fact in verse 8 Paul tells them that they were in effect going back to their former life of ignorance and slavery and paganism. That was a time he says when they did not know God and so they were slaves to those which by nature are no Gods. They may be considered Gods by the world but there is not deity in those false Gods. They are just blocks of wood and stone. In fact behind idols are demons. That’s what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:12.

In the opening scene of *Paradise Lost* John Milton describes Lucifer lying vanquished in hell having been cast out of heaven. He is surrounded by the fallen angels and they all have the names of the heathen Gods, Moloch, **Chimosh**, Baal, **Bagon**, the gods of Canaan, the gods of Egypt, Greece, Rome. That was the true spiritual nature of the gentile gods. They were no gods but there were spiritual realities behind them. The demons were involved in the idols. And in their former days the Galatians lived in slavish fear to those heathen gods and they were involved in all the terrible and the degrading practices of paganism.

Now that former enslavement is somewhat understandable because they were living in ignorance of the only true God. They were living in darkness and they turned to all of that which is of the darkness. But there’s no explanation or at least there is no excuse for their present condition. So Paul asks then in verse 9 how is it that after being delivered, after coming to know God, they could then turn from him to go back to what Paul calls the weak and worthless elemental things. How could they turn from the power of grace in the gospel for the ineffective things of paganism to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?

Now in fact the Galatians were not returning to paganism. They were putting themselves under the law of Moses and the two it would certainly seem could hardly be more different. The first two commands of the ten commandments condemn idolatry,

condemn paganism. But the legalism of the Judais which was of the same character or the same principle as the heathen religions in one essential way. Both are opposed to grace. Both are systems of works, or gaining God’s acceptance by human merit, by the things that we do, and both are weak and worthless because they have no power to impart life.

They cannot give the riches and inheritance that is ours in Christ alone through faith in Him. All of the major religions of the world differ from one another in many respects but at their core they are all the same. They are about keeping rules or ceremonies to gain salvation and they are Paul says worthless. Christianity alone is different. It is unique. It is all about grace, about the free gift of salvation and the power of God in the gospel to change lives and make people into a new creation. It is God’s work, not man’s, and Paul says that the Galatians had come to know him.

What a privilege, what an inestimable blessing that is to be taken out of darkness and brought into the light, to come to know the living God who dwells in unapproachable light. They had that great privilege. In their pagan days they had been ignorant of him but now he says they have come to know God. Better still they had come to be known by God. The difference between those two statements is significant. They did know God and the word that Paul uses here for knowledge is knowledge that is gained by observation and experience. So it’s not just intellectual knowledge. It’s personal knowledge.

They had a personal relationship with God. They not only know about him which is a great blessing, but they know him. They knew him by experience. They knew him personally. But it was not as though they had come to know him and entered into this relationship with him because they had gone out and sought him and found him. They were the objects of God’s knowledge. God made the connection when they were in complete ignorance and bondage. And so to make that clear, Paul makes the change from you have come to know God to be known by God. It is a way of describing God’s unconditional election and irresistible grace.

That’s frequently the word to know is used in the Old Testament. For example in Amos 3:2 God says to Israel “You only have I known of all the families of the earth.” Now God of course knew all of the families of the earth. He knew all of the nations. God’s omniscient. In fact he established all of the nations, set their boundaries, knows them completely, fully, absolutely. You can’t know anything more about them than God knows. He knows everything. So it doesn’t mean he knows intellectually here. He

means he knows personally. He knew Israel in a special way. He knew them in a personal way. They were his nation by election, by his choice. He chose Israel out of all of the nations.

So this is knowledge that is saving because it’s based upon divine election. They knew God because he first knew them. He loved them from all eternity and found them. The emphasis here is on sovereign grace, on the free gift of salvation which is highlighted in the contrast Paul makes between versus 8 and 9 with the phrase “but now.” You find that in other books, see it for example in Ephesians 2 very prominently but we see it here. But now. “You did not know God but now you have come to be known by God.”

John Newton picked up on that phrase but now and used it in his great hymn *Amazing Grace*. He was as you well know a former slave trader who at one point became a slave himself, a man who knew the depths of human depravity but he was miraculously saved. He was miraculously taken out of that and he understood the grace of God so he wrote in his hymn, “I once was lost but now am found/ was blind but now I see.”

Newton understood grace and knew what it meant to be a brand plucked from the fire. These Galatians had known that too at one time but they seem to have forgotten that. At least they were forgetting it, forgetting the greatness of God’s grace. Paul asks “How is it that you turn back again?” The word turn is a present tense so it indicates that they were in the process of turning. They had not yet actually done it. They had not completed this turn. They had not completely rejected the gospel. They had not committed themselves wholly and completely to the elemental things, to legalism. They were in the process of doing it but because they had not yet actually done it there’s still hope for them.

But Paul was alarmed that they had made a start in that direction. They were already keeping the Jewish calendar. Verses 10 and 11, “You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.” Well the problem here wasn’t that they were observing the Sabbath or Jewish feast days. Paul was free from that. Christians are free from that. But Paul also felt free to do that, to observe those days. In the book of Acts we see him arrange his visits to Jerusalem according to the Jewish calendar and he observed those feast days. He kept those seasons of the calendar.

Today Christians do something similar. They celebrate Christmas and Easter. There’s nothing wrong with doing that as long as people don’t seek to gain merit with

God by doing it or require other people to do it. The church is free from calendars and special days. The New Testament makes it clear that we are not to legislate such things for other people Romans 14: 4 – 13 teaches that very clearly. We’re not under these kinds of rules. But at the same time Paul was free to conform to Jewish law and customs when he was in the company of Jewish people and to not conform when he was among gentiles.

He did what would best promote the gospel. He became all things to all men. But the church is not required to observe days and seasons and years of the Jewish law or of an ecclesiastical calendar. We are not under the Sabbath law. If we were we would keep Saturday which is the Sabbath, not Sunday. The New Testament nowhere teaches that the Sabbath has been switched to Sunday. We observe Sunday as the Lord’s day in memory of the resurrection and we are instructed to meet regularly as a church not to merit God’s approval but because it honors Christ and it’s good for us.

But the Galatians were following the religious schedule of the law, not as a freedom but as an obligation. They were again becoming slaves to the elemental things. So Paul says “I fear for you that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.” He feared that in adopting the law they were rejecting the gospel and approaching apostasy. Law and grace cannot be mixed. Luther illustrated the danger of that by using one of Aesop’s fables. He said that a person who tries to gain salvation by faith plus works is like a dog who runs along a stream with a piece of meat in its mouth deceived by the reflection of the water seeing the meat in the reflected in the water. The dog snaps at it to gain another piece of meat and as he opens his mouth he loses the meat that he has and the reflection, loses everything.

Trying to have the law with faith results in loss and no justification with God. And so pursuing such a path will end in ruin and in apostasy. Now let me be clear about apostasy. Apostasy separates the true believer from a person who is only a professing believer. A true believer cannot commit apostasy. But one way the Lord prevents it from happening and keeps us persevering in the faith as every true believer will do, one way that he does that is through the warnings of scripture. And so when a true believer begins to wander and begins to entertain error and begins to head in the direction of apostasy the word of God comes to bear on that person.

A minister or a friend will speak the warnings of scripture, will speak to that person and it is through in that way that God speaks to his people and as our Lord said “My sheep hear my voice. They know me and they follow me” and the true believer will

follow the voice of the Lord. He’ll respond. He or she has ears to hear. Those who don’t will not. And so Paul is doing that here and in verse 12 he pleads with the Galatians to adopt his understanding of the law. “I beg you brethren become as I am for I also have become as you are.”

Paul became as they are by becoming like a gentile. When he came to Galatia he didn’t come preaching the law or observing the days and diets of the law. He came without the law and he begged them to have the same attitude about the law. It was a plea for them to enjoy their Christian liberty, to re-enter the experience of their Christian freedom. They originally had that freedom and joy when they first accepted his preaching and showed unusual kindness toward him. In verse 14 he says they received him as an angel of God which was very unusual because when he came to them he was not as his best. He was suffering from a physical illness.

In fact in verse 13 Paul says that it was because of this illness that he preached to them the first time. Evidentially he was so severely sick that it required that he remain there to recuperate. There’s been a lot of speculation about what this illness was. One suggestion is malaria which he caught along the mosquito infested southern coast of Asia Minor forcing him to higher elevations where the air was safe. Others have suggested that it was epilepsy because in verse 14 he says that this affliction was a trial for them, meaning a temptation to reject him due to the disturbing sight of seizures.

The most common view is that he had an affliction of the eyes that made his appearance repugnant. If this were the case it would allow him to preach. An affliction of the eyes wouldn’t have affected that. He could have continued to preach but would have done so with an appearance that was unpleasant for them to look at. So it too would have been a trial for them. Now there’s some evidence for that from the text because in verse 15 he says “You would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me.” And then at the end of the epistle in chapter 6 in verse 11 he writes, “See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.” Poor eyesight may have forced him to write large.

Whatever his illness it was probably the same thing he refers to in 2 Corinthians 12:7 as his “thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from exalting myself.” This says a lot about Paul, tells us about his condition, about his courage in preaching the gospel, his devotion to the gospel. But it also says a lot about the Galatians because as Paul says in verse 14 it was a trial for them. They were tempted

to despise him which literally means to spit out. So they might have reacted to him, to his sickness or his appearance with disgust or loathing. They were tempted to do that but they didn’t. They received him gladly. In fact they received him he says as an angel of God as Christ Jesus himself.

No wonder Paul loved these Galatians and felt deeply for them. This made it all the more sad that their attitude had changed toward him. He asks in verse 15 “Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that if possible you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me.” There was a time Paul was saying when you would have done anything for me, even blinded yourself. Again that may indicate the nature of his illness as we said or it may simply be a way of saying they would have made any sacrifice for him.

There’s an ancient story about two Scythians, two barbarians. That’s what the Scythians were and there were two who were best friends and one of them was captured by the enemy. And the other sacrificed his eyes to ransom him from captivity. When the captured friend was freed he blinded himself because he could not bear to see his friend’s blindness. There was a time when the Galatians would have done the same for Paul but all of that had changed. Now they felt differently about him. They felt differently about everything. They had lost the sense of blessing they originally had.

That’s what legalism does. It robs people of blessing. Now it gives a lot. It gives a lot of rules and regulations to keep. It gives a lot of burden to bear but it robs people of blessing. And Paul came and proclaimed grace and these Galatians learned about the forgiveness of sin through faith alone, about the gift of salvation. They rejoiced. They rejoiced because they had life. They were freed from paganism and the dreary prospects of it and the labors of it and they were clean and they felt all of that. That’s what grace produces, happiness and rest and relief. Christ delivers us from the daily grinding at the mill of works. The burden is lifted and we’re free, free to obey, free to obey out of love because we understand God’s love.

The Galatians had understood that and loved Paul for bringing them the message of freedom. Then the Judaizers came with their legalism and the gratitude and love and joy that the Galatians had, they were all snuffed out under the new burdens that they had been placed under. And in place of those great blessings of joy and love and peace grew pride and anger and weariness. So now Paul who had been like an angel to them, like Christ himself, was their enemy. And the reason he says in verse 16 is he had told them

the truth. He had taught grace. The teachers of the law had come claiming that Paul had shortchanged them, that he had not given them the full gospel, that the law was necessary and that Paul was a false teacher.

The Galatians came under their spell. They were bewitched with this new teaching, bewitched with legalism. They came to trust in these new teachers and to distrust Paul. They considered him their enemy. Now being considered an enemy for speaking the truth is not an uncommon experience. In fact that’s the norm. Some of you have probably become an enemy of some friend or family member for giving them the gospel, for speaking the truth. If that’s the case then you are in good company right there with the apostle Paul but you are no enemy, not really. You are the greatest friend a person can have. You give the truth.

Now the real enemy Paul explains is the Judaizers. They were completely self serving. That was the reason they came to Galatia to gain the Galatians for themselves. He says in verse 17 “they eagerly seek you.” Literally they are zealous for you which is not bad in and of itself. There’s nothing wrong with people being interested in you, showing an interest in you, being zealous for you. Parents are zealous for their children, eager for them to have what is best and know the truth and to live well and to live rightly. In fact Paul says in verse 18 it is good to be sought in a commendable manner. He had come to Galatia seeking these Galatians, seeking them in a commendable manner because he was seeking them for Christ.

But these Judaizers were not seeking them in that way. They weren’t courting them for Christ. They were seducing them. They were bewitching them for themselves. Paul writes, “they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them,” meaning shut them out from Paul’s influence, from his teaching of grace. That was the reason that they attacked his apostleship in order to isolate these Galatians from his influence. They had succeeded in doing that. They had convinced them that Paul was their enemy. They wanted the Galatians to depend upon them alone for spiritual counsel.

The Judaizers were building their own little kingdom. Ministers sometimes do that. They work hard at building a ministry but not for Christ. It’s for themselves. It’s for their own glory or maybe for financial gain. That is typical of false ministers of the gospel and I think we see a lot of that but it can also be true of a genuine believer, a genuine minister of the gospel. We can become seduced into those kinds of selfish,

motives of selfish ambition ourselves. We all need to examine our motives for what we do.

Paul’s motives were pure and selfless. He understood that his task as a spiritual leader was to direct people to love and follow Christ, not to promote himself. And he was completely devoted to that. His only concern was to grow the Galatians into Christ. His concern for them was like that of a mother for her children. He writes, “My children with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you.” He wanted to see them grow up in the faith and become like Christ, just like parents want to see their children grow to maturity in every way. And the effort he gave to see that happen and the emotion he felt for them is compared to that of a mother in birth pains.

He went through labor with them the first time when he originally brought the gospel to them, suffering with illness, suffering persecution and yet through those efforts they were born again. But now 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. Now he doesn’t deny their salvation but their spiritual condition was so weak and immature that it was as though as Calvin said they had again become embryos.

Paul has to bring them back to their original understanding when they first believed the gospel. It took great effort on his part but out of great love for them he labors for them. He is determined to labor for them until the shapeless embryo becomes a mature person, until he says “Christ is formed in you.” That was the apostle’s goal for God’s people. That’s God’s goal for us.

J.I. Packer once recalled a sermon he heard shortly before he became a Christian in which the minister said “What God wants in our lives is more of his son.” That happens because through faith we are placed in Christ. We are mysteriously joined to him and through the indwelling Holy Spirit Christ’s life is communicated to us. It is resurrection life. It is dynamic, life transforming life. A child of God is undergoing a supernatural change. You as a believer in Jesus Christ are at this moment being nourished by the life of Christ and being changed and transformed. And that process will never stop.

This is a union that will never be broken. We have been grafted into Christ and like a branch grafted into a tree we gain the life of that tree, the life of that person and we can never be broken off. The one who began this work, who implanted us in Christ began

to change us, will never stop doing that, will see it through to its completion. We see that promise given throughout the New Testament. We see it in our Lord’s promise in John 10:28 where he says “I give eternal life to them and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand.” So when Christ joins himself to us, he joins us to his resurrection life for all eternity and forms us into his image.

The word formed here is a passive verb. Doesn’t indicate what the Galatians were doing. It indicates what was being done to the Galatians that they are the objects of Christ’s work. It’s not their activity. It’s the Lord’s activity. Now he uses instruments and agents to accomplish this change in us, preachers and friends and even circumstances, but primarily he uses his word and always it is the Holy Spirit who makes the scriptures, makes the word of God and other means of grace effective in bringing about this formation of Christ in us.

Paul describes the process in 2 Corinthians 3:18. In seminal language instead of Christ being formed in us he writes of us being transformed. It’s basically the same word with the same idea that we have here in verse 19. It has the same root and the same idea. “Beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, we are” he says “Being transformed into the same image from glory to glory just as from the Lord the spirit.” In other words the Lord, the Holy Spirit transforms us into the image of Christ as we study the scriptures and we see Christ in the scriptures.

Now it doesn’t happen by trying to practice the law with its commands and its ceremonies and its days as though by doing these things we’ll shape ourselves or we’ll gain God’s help and God’s approval. All that does is bring us into bondage. Christ through the Spirit using the scriptures changes us, forms us into Christ like people, makes us grow up and become mature people of faith. It’s all a work of grace.

Now Paul believed that the Galatians were believers. He believed that they were in Christ. He calls them his children. But it wasn’t enough that they were in Christ. He wanted to see Christ formed in them. He wanted to carry on his labor of love, of helping that happen by being there and he concludes the text by saying in verse 20 that he wished he could be present with them and change his tone. He wouldn’t change his teaching. He wouldn’t change his doctrine. He wished he could be with them to reinforce the great doctrines of grace and justification and sanctification. But he would like to do it with milder language and win them back.

Loving parents don’t enjoy disciplining their children. It’s a hard thing. It’s a very unpleasant thing necessary as it is but they prefer to be gentle rather than harsh and Paul wanted to speak to them in a kindly way. He needed to do that to speak to them at length because though he believed them to be justified, to be saved, to be children of God, brethren as he calls them in verse 12, still he says “I am perplexed about you.”

Paul is very much a model for us. We should be concerned for one another’s spiritual development. We shouldn’t be indifferent toward each other. We shouldn’t give each other a nod on Sunday morning and maybe a pleasant, polite greeting and then forget about each other throughout the week. We’re bound together. Paul will develop this much more fully in chapter 6, develops the whole chapter toward this mutual encouragement and help that we’re to give to one another. But this tells us the kind of people we’re to be toward one another. We’re to be concerned about one another. We’re to give attention to one another. We’re to be very much concerned about the spiritual development of each person in this assembly and laboring for it, speaking the truth to one another in love.

So we gain a model of how we’re to be, kind of people we’re to be from Paul but we also from the Galatians get a warning. And the warning is how easy it is to slip away from the truth, to be hypnotized, to be bewitched by false ideas and fail to grow. And to fail to grow in the Christian life is not to stand still. There’s no standing still in the Christian life. If we’re not going forward then we’re going backwards. If we’re not growing we’re regressing. That’s what was happening to the Galatians. That’s the lesson we can learn from them. May God help us to see that, to avoid the pitfalls of legalism, to understand and rejoice in grace and to always be seeking to grow in God’s grace, in the knowledge of it and the experience of it and have Christ formed in us.

I quoted Newton’s great hymn, *Amazing Grace*, earlier in the lesson. Let’s end by singing it. Let’s stand and sing in the red hymn book, hymn 227 and then remain standing for the benediction. Hymn 227.

[Prayer] Father we thank you for that grace. It truly is amazing. Those of us who have experienced, I trust that’s everyone in this room, are like brands who have been plucked from the fire. We thank you for that. But if there be any attending who don’t know Christ, who have not yet been plucked, we pray that you would be gracious to them, give them eyes to see, ears to hear to sense the condition they are in and by your grace may they turn to you. Thank you for the grace you’ve given us, for sending your son to die for us and the life that we have in

him. It’s in his name we pray. Amen.