

STUDIES IN GALATIANS No. 16

Galatians 4:8-11

June 27, 1999

Text Comment

- v.8** Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10:20 may say that in their idolatries, pagans actually serve demons, but he says there and elsewhere (10:19; 8:4-5) that idols are, in fact, nothing. Not only are they not gods, they are not anything but the material from which they are made. The OT prophets made this point, you may remember, with bitter scorn, in the face of Israel's flirtation with pagan idolatry. They would mock the devotion of people to a piece of wood, the rest of which was used as fuel in the fire, or which would stand upright only if the craftsman were good enough. The Galatians now knew this about the idols they formerly worshipped!
- v.9** The weak and miserable "principles" = "stoicheia" which we discussed last Lord's Day evening. These "principles" we said are the "vain traditions of sinful men, the religious ideas and principles that sinful men come to by nature" as a means of finding favor with God. Jewish legalists and pagan idolaters alike are subject to them, a highly controversial point that Paul makes very emphatically here, as you can see by comparing the two uses of the term in vv. 3 and 9.
- v.10** This is how they are enslaving themselves to the "weak and miserable principles" of man-made religion. They are capitulating to the judaizers' insistence that they practice judaism in order to be full-fledged and authentic Christians. Earlier in the letter we learned that circumcision was a chief issue (2:3), and that the food laws were as well, with their implications for the association of Jews and Gentiles (2:11-14). Now, we learn that the judaizers were also demanding observance of the Jewish calendar by Gentile converts. This demand was to be a problem everywhere in the first century and surfaces in other of Paul's letters, viz. Romans and Colossians. The specific reference -- "days, months, seasons, and years" -- is probably simply a reference to the Jewish religious calendar, from weekly Sabbaths, to new moons (first mentioned in Numbers 28:11-15), to the great feasts of the year (Passover, etc.), to special years (jubilee?).

In every case, of course, the problem Paul found here was not, as we have said, the celebrations themselves, but the legalistic theory that underlay their celebration. Paul celebrated them himself as a Christian! But the false theory was exposed when Jews demanded that Gentiles practice them as well as they.

There was no objection to Jewish believers continuing to observe the Saturday Sabbath, anymore than there was to their continued practice of circumcision. The problem was the thinking that brought them to the view that unless Gentiles -- for whom the Sunday Sabbath was "the Lord's Day" -- also observed this Jewish spiritual culture, they could not be authentic Christians. That is why, whenever Paul raises these issues, legalism is the bugbear!

(E.g. Colossians 2:8, 19: "hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends upon human tradition and the basic principles [*stoicheia*] rather than on Christ"; "has lost connection with the Head".)

There is nothing surprising about this combination of demands -- circumcision, clean foods, and the liturgical calendar -- for those were the primary means by which Jews distinguished themselves and maintained separation from Gentiles. They were the defining characteristics of Jewish spiritual culture -- the most precious things to the loyal Jews -- like an American patriot having to get used to a different flag.

Now the burden of Paul's argument in these four verses is clear enough. These Christians had been delivered from the falsehood and futility of the natural religious ideas and practices of mankind (inherently legalistic and/or ritualistic -- in which human acts substitute for a living knowledge of and trust in God as the basis of salvation) -- whether Jewish or Gentile -- into the glorious freedom of the true knowledge of the living God, of justification by faith in Christ, and of a life whose principle is love and gratitude. Why on earth, having found the life that is worthy to be called life, would they give it up to go back to that bondage and futility they had escaped? The question is rhetorical, of course.

The reason men do this is because the human heart, as Calvin memorably put it, is an "idol factory." And, as Charles Simeon wrote, "The human mind is very fond of fetters, and is apt to forge them for itself." [Moule, 185] Sin makes fools of us all.

We see this all the time, don't we? It breaks our hearts. Young people making choices everyone can see but they will be ruinous to their happiness; but they are adamant. They know better. And adults do the very same. Everyone is looking for happiness -- that is why the Lord began his Sermon on the Mount with an appeal to the universal human interest in happiness -- but human beings, sinners that they are, tend to look for it in all the wrong places. Robert Downey Jr. just got sent back to jail for six weeks because he admitted to the Judge that he had been using drugs during his probation. We think, how can someone be so stupid! But that is what sin does. And it does it to everybody. Sin makes stupidity look like wisdom, death look like life, grief and pain look like pleasure and the fulfillment of life.

So it is not really a surprise that men make really foolish choices as these Galatians did, however exasperating it may have been to Paul. The history of the Christian church in the world is, in large part, the history of this same stupidity.

But, it is very interesting to notice the specific point Paul makes here about the grip that man's natural religious ideas have upon the human soul and, accordingly, how hard it is for people to hold on to the pure gospel. A drug addict may continue to use drugs even after his life has been devastated by his drug use because, after all, he has become physically and psychologically dependent upon them. A woman may return to a violent and philandering husband over and over again because she is afraid to leave him or because she is afraid to be alone. But, why would a Christian who had tasted the fresh air of the gospel go back to the putrid atmosphere of works and

human performance?

Luther, speaking out of his own experience, explained it this way.

"Here we see again, as I have warned earlier, that it is very easy to fall from faith. The example of the Galatians attests to this; so does the example of the Sacramentarians, the Anabaptists, and others today. With great zeal and diligence we inculcate, urge, and emphasize the teaching of the faith by speaking, reading, and writing; we distinguish the Gospel from the Law in a very pure way. And yet we accomplish very little. The fault is the devil's, who is wondrously skilled at seducing people; and there is nothing he finds more intolerable than the true knowledge of grace and faith in Christ. To remove Christ from the gaze and from the heart, he produces other specters, by which he gradually leads men from faith and the knowledge of grace to the discussion of the Law." [LW 26, 395]

One might think that the gospel, being such a revolutionary concept, so utterly different from the natural religious ideas of mankind, once grasped it would never be lost. But it is not so. Even in true churches and even in true hearts, it must be held on to with all the might, else it will be lost, or, if not lost, will be covered over, its force weakened in the heart.

And this is true of Christianity in all its forms. You may be familiar with the brilliant observation of C. S. Lewis to the effect that the loss of the gospel tends to take distinctive forms depending upon the nature of the church or denomination.

"When Catholicism goes bad it becomes the [religion] of amulets and holy places and priestcraft; Protestantism, in its corresponding decay, becomes a vague mist of ethical platitudes. Catholicism is accused of being too like all the other religions; Protestantism of being insufficiently like a religion at all. Hence Plato, with his transcendent forms, is the doctor of Protestants; Aristotle, with his immanent forms, the doctor of Catholics." [*The Allegory of Love*, 323]

Similarly, Paul's point, comparing v. 3 with v. 9, is that it matters not whether one is worshipping images or reducing religion to ethics or good works (and still today you can find those same two tendencies in churches that would claim to be evangelical and orthodox). It matters not if you continue to profess with loudest voice your commitment to the grace of God, if grace and so faith are not the living principles of your religious life, you might as well be a pagan idolater or a Jewish legalist. **Remember, the judaizers were professing Christians! They believed Jesus was the Messiah, they believed he had risen from the dead, they preached the necessity of faith in him! But they also left a place for obedience -- especially to certain ritual requirements -- in the calculation of one's peace and acceptance with God.**

There are Reformed Churches that trumpet the sovereignty of divine grace as their watchword and yet everyone but they can see that they are deeply legalistic. They would excommunicate one of their elders -- even a national figure -- for attending the funeral of a government colleague, because that colleague was a Roman Catholic and the funeral service, therefore, a mass. So pure are they

from any idolatry. But, for all their abhorrence at the idolatry of the mass, they are subject as well to the "basic principles of the world." They have so narrowly defined what is an appropriate Christian culture and an appropriate Christian behavior and so strictly enforce its rule in their churches that people cannot help, over time, but to evaluate their Christianity according to their conformity to the demands of that spiritual culture. Indeed, so confining, so stifling is their spiritual culture, that most of the greatest Christians of history could not, would not be accepted in their churches. And, in that, they have slipped back into the mindset of the judaizers. Sure, you must believe in Christ; but you must **do these things also**. And do them not **because** you are a Christian, but to be regarded as a Christian at all.

I have a friend whom I met in Scotland, who then studied at Covenant Theological Seminary. He was excommunicated from the church of his upbringing for two crimes: riding a bus to church on Sunday and attending an entirely orthodox, Calvinistic, evangelical church of another denomination. What is this but injecting into a Christian view of grace and salvation another, alien, principle of conformity to regulations for one's acceptance as a Christian, for one's peace with God. They would, of course, hotly reply, "By no means! We are not legalists. We condemn legalism in all its forms." They believe in justification by faith and salvation by Christ. But, the judaizers would have said that! The danger is far more subtle. But, the fact remains, they would excommunicate a person with a true faith and a consistent life, because he did not measure up to the requirements of their own spiritual culture.

Paul's entire point is that one can desert the gospel while claiming to uphold it; introduce self-salvation into an evangelical system and not even know that one has done so. I'm sure these Gentile believers didn't think they had fundamentally shifted the foundation of their faith. **They didn't think they were returning to their former slavery!** They didn't imagine that they were betraying the faith they had embraced when they became Christians. They would have hotly denied that they had any intention whatsoever, or any sense personally, that they were turning their backs on the knowledge of God. They didn't see their participation in Jewish ceremonies as a repudiation of the gospel. They thought they had simply adjusted some of the requirements of the Christian life. Paul had to tell them what a catastrophic mistake they were making, how immense the error. They wouldn't have imagined it otherwise.

This is why we have to be so careful at the two ends of this continuum. We have to be so careful to protect against all forms of **ritualism** on the one hand -- in which religious acts are permitted to substitute for a living dependence upon Christ -- and all forms of **ethicism** in which certain behaviors are taken to be tantamount to proof of true Christian faith and loyalty to Christ. We can see outward behavior and we can see ritual and attendance upon it, and it is so profoundly natural for us to measure things by what we can see, instead of by the unseen realities of the heart. We are forever doing this in so many different ways in life. And we have grown to expect that people will judge us as we judge them by what we can see of their behavior. And, in Christianity, that is doubly a problem because ritual itself is essential to the practice of the Christian faith and so are good works. Christianity is deformed by the absence of ritual and good works as surely as it is deformed by the insertion of ritual and good works in one's understanding of justification. But here we are talking about the danger of substituting ritualism and obedience for faith as the instrument of our

justification, as the way we become the sons and daughters of God.

The Bible teaches us that vast multitudes of people will be surprised on the Great Day to learn that all they really had to show for a Christian faith was certain outward behaviors that conformed to the expectations of their religious culture **or** that they regularly performed certain religious acts approved in their part of the Christian church. But, if the truth be told, however "religious" these people, however much they were approved as Christians in their own religious community, they did not live depending upon Christ, walking with Christ, and serving Christ. They had based their hope of salvation on other things than their living connection to the Redeemer.

You see it doesn't make any difference, ultimately, if a man gives up his Christianity and abandons Christian belief because he wants to chase another woman, not his wife (as a former pastor in this Presbytery did), or a person spends all of his or her life sitting in a Christian church, taken by all around him or her as a member in good standing, but whose Christianity, when all is said and done, when the pretense is stripped away, consists really simply in outward behavior that conforms to the expectations of the group or consists simply in his or her faithful attendance at church.

There are people among us, whose Christianity is visible only on Sundays and only for a few hours at that. And you know very well, especially those of you who have been Christians a long time, you know two things very well.

First, you know that you often wonder about certain people. There is an outward conformity, to be sure, they come faithfully to church, but you miss the spark of faith, the living echo of genuine communion with God in their conversation and in their living so far as you know it. You wonder if they are really Christians. You don't ask them such a question because you know they would be deeply offended at the mere suggestion that they are not truly Christians. But you wonder about them. They seem to you to be all outward conformity; there is nothing about them that speaks of the amazing grace of God, of the stupendous fact of deliverance from sin and death by the sacrifice of Christ, or of the love of the living God and the hope of serving God as the great interest of his or her life.

But, second, you who are practiced Christians, you also wonder about yourself. You have observed in your own behavior, your own inner life especially, how easily your Christianity can become less a living relationship with God and Christ, less the true and personal knowledge of God, and more, much more a routine of activities -- good activities to be sure, but activities nonetheless. You know how it is with you: how for days sometimes you can go along doing the things that Christians do, but without much if any sense of living communion with God. Your prayers, to the extent you pray at all, are perfunctory -- not the earnest and familiar talking with God that real sons and daughters of God would enjoy. There is little of a sense of real spiritual battle going on within -- you accept for days at a time the way things are and hardly think about them except so far as your circumstances make you comfortable or uncomfortable. And, if faith is, as Luther says, "nothing else but a sure and steadfast looking to Christ," you know that some days and some weeks you have hardly any faith, because you don't really look to Christ at all for much of anything. You have taken it all for granted.

And, if you think about it, taking your salvation for granted amounts to trusting your outward conformity to certain Christian standards for your salvation, which is not materially different than the position of the judaizers that Paul is attacking with such vengeance here in Galatians. It is just a Christian form of a religion founded on those same "weak and miserable principles" that animate all the rest of human religion. And the wonder of divine grace has been exchanged once again -- if only for a day or a week -- for the same old chains, the same old futility, the same old conventional religious conformity that the rest of the world knows and has never escaped.

The days and years are passing, brothers and sisters. We had a member of our body reach her 80th birthday this past week. A week before that two members of our congregation lost family members to death. A former pastor of the congregation, now in his old age, struggles with a distracted mind in a nursing home. We come and go from this world at different times. Some live longer than others. But, we will all gather at the judgment seat of Christ at the same time, the same moment.

What a scene that will be! Those of you who have been in the Sistine chapel and seen Michaelangelo's "Last Judgment" perhaps remember the impact of that painting: the wailing of the lost, the dawning of doom on the faces of those who thought better of their prospects. It seems far away from the busy pace of our life, and the pleasure of this world, and the easy mixture of Christians and non-Christians in both the world and the church. But, our Savior warned us of that coming day, over and again, in the most solemn tones possible.

How many of you here tonight, some three hundred souls, how many of you here will be found gathered on the Savior's right hand and how many on his left? When we meet there, my brethren, I very much hope I shall find many of you on the King's right hand and few on the left. I do not say that I hope I shall find **all** of you on the King's right hand and none on the left. I hope that, of course. But, I fear that if I said that, if I put it that way, you would take that prospect too lightly. And, truth be told, the Bible seems to teach it to be an unlikely thing that in a single church of our size everyone is truly a Christian, that there is no one who has deceived himself or herself, substituting an outward conformity, a ritual conformity for a living communion with and dependence upon the Lord Christ, a communion that directs, that governs, that shapes life every day.

Here is Paul. He isn't sure about these converts in Galatia. It is simply entirely too possible for people to mistake their own spiritual situation and to think they know God when they have, in fact, refused that knowledge. You won't make that mistake, will you? Not you. Surely not you!