

Title: Paul's Theological Defense: Persevering in Grace and the Fatal Flaw of Legalism.

Text: Galatians 4:8-11

Theme: The absence of faithfulness and the returning to bondage can be an indicator of an empty profession.

Introduction: Paul gives us a short but powerful passage dealing with the Galatians problem. The false brethren were telling them to do in order to advance in spiritual maturity and their relationship with God. Paul tells them to rest in who God is and what He has done and what they are in Christ. This same struggle exists today.

THE BIG PICTURE:

In considering the book of Galatians we can note a three-fold division.

- Chapters 1-2 = Personal/Biographical/ Authorization/Vindication
- Chapters 3-4 = Doctrinal/Biblical/Presentation/Exposition
- Chapters 5-6 = Practical/Behavioral/ Application

Its Eternal Value:

God has delivered us from slavery. We must never go back.

The Problem:

Many of us are familiar with stories of animals released from captivity only to return to their captivity or prisoners who when released commit crimes to be put back into jail. They return to what they know. How can we keep dogs from returning to their vomit and pig from wallowing in the mud?

The Storyline:

For the Jew there is no greater event than the Exodus from Egypt. This is a constant reference point for the nation. Even the non-Jew was aware of these things. It would be like us referencing Christmas. Everyone in America knows what we are talking about even if they do not understand the significance of the event. Like the Israelites of old, those who have been delivered began to look back and think living in captivity was greater than living as a free people. Remember the events of Kadesh Barnea (READ Numbers 14).

Numbers 14:1 Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. 2 All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, "**Would that we had died in the land of Egypt!** Or would that we had died in this wilderness! 3 "Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; **would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?**" 4 So they said to one another, "**Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt.**"

"This picture of the wilderness wanderings lies behind Paul's impassioned appeal in this passage. The Galatian Christians have come out of the 'Egypt' of idolatry, of

worshipping false gods. They have been set free, redeemed by the person action of the one true God in his son and his spirit. Now, it seems, they have had to look at the wide and worrying world of freedom, and they don't like what they see. They are determined to return once more to the world where life seems safer, more regulated, where you know where you are: in other words, to the life of slavery." (Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 49).

For the Christian to return to their past is like the Israelites returning to Egypt.

Questions:

1. Notice the contrast between the Jews and the Gentile. What are they?
2. Is verse 9 speaking of God's omniscience or God's "election"?
3. Are the elemental things in verse 9 the same as in verse 3?
4. How are they the same, how might they be different?
5. What was Paul's concern? Is he concerned that they might not be saved?
6. Assuming that "basic principles of the world" refers to the Galatians' pre-Christian religious beliefs, can you think of how religious beliefs not based on Christ can cause one to be "enslaved" or "in bondage"?
7. It is common, almost a cliché, to state that "Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship." Explain the distinction between "a religion" and "a relationship."
8. Is it possible that one can get so caught up with the traditions and rituals of "religion" that one completely misses the God to whom those traditions and rituals point? How does this relate to the statement that "Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship"?
9. Is there a sense in which "religion" can trap or hold somebody back from knowing God?
10. Suppose one had the religious belief that one earned blessings from God by being especially good or "spiritual." Can you think of how that could prevent one from knowing what God was really like?
11. Can you think of any specific religious beliefs or practices that you now have, or had in the past, that are/were ABOUT God, but in fact kept you from truly knowing Him?
12. In what way have you found your religious experience "enslaving?" How does your relationship with God feel right now? Does it feel like you are enslaved to a religious system?
13. Why do you think the Galatians would turn away from their "spiritual success" following the path of faith, to pursue God via a different path, the path of "law"?
14. Have you ever felt dissatisfied with your life as a Christian? Disappointed with the rate of progress in your spiritual life? Have you had times when you felt unfulfilled in your relationship with God? At these times, were you ever tempted to pursue a "different path" in your spiritual journey? In the space below, explain how Galatians 4:8-11 pertains to these questions.

The Holy Spirit is calling to us from this passage to consider three ideas.

To Know: The Holy Spirit desires for us to know He loves us more than we love Him.

To Choose: The Holy Spirit desires for us to choose not to turn back from following Him.

To Feel: The Holy Spirit desires for us to feel the joy of resting in His sufficiency.

Outline:

I. The Problem at Galatia (4:8-11)

A. Their Pagan Past (v. 8).

Paul makes two comments about their past.

1. Their empty profession

Their past life was that they had served false gods and had not entered into a personal, experiential relationship with the true God. The word chosen by Paul to describe their past experience is **eido**. The emphasis is on an experiential knowledge versus a theoretical or abstract understanding.

This appears to be the same idea in Matthew 7:21-23?

21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter.²² "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?'²³ "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew (**ginosko**) you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'

This is one of the most perplexing passages in the New Testament. It is only the context that unfolds for us the meaning. Please note verse twenty. In light of verse twenty I would want to believe those described in verses twenty-one and twenty-two are saved. Yet verse twenty-three gives us this startling revelation. How can this happen? I believe the next paragraph (vv. 24-27) gives us the answer. It is never what you do, but upon whom you build that determines your eternal destiny. There are many people who are very sincere and devote in their “religious” expressions. Yet they are lost because they are not resting their lives on Christ alone.

2. Their meaningless service

How sad. They had given themselves to the task of serving, but the object of their affection and the recipient of their energy was, in truth, no god.

How many countless billions profess godliness and render acts of devotion that amount to nothing more than self-centered humanism? What a horrible day await the unaware and unprepared unbeliever?

Verse 10, "Times [trends], years [patterns]," the Galatians wanted to observe that which had previously kept them in bondage. Some suggest this may indicate they were worshippers of the heavenly bodies.

B. Their Present Practice (v. 9a).

The Galatians knew God personally and God knew them intimately, but they were now turning back into bondage. Paul changes his word usage (**ginosko**). His word choice means, "Intimate and personal." It is the kind of word the Bible would use of a husband knowing his wife. Verse nine would **appear to suggest** a genuine conversion experience in the language used by the apostle Paul.

Friend, it isn't what you know or who you know, but who knows you. **Yet how did Paul know this? He knew this because of their profession of faith and because of their pattern in life.** Please hear me out. It is important that we seek to understand the seriousness of the problem as it was manifesting itself among the believers in the Galatian church.

However, before we begin it is important to note the differences between three inter-related terms; preservation (God keeps), perseverance (Man continues), and assurance (Man's confidence). **Preservation** is God keeping the believer. John 10:27-30 assures me that no one is able to pluck me out of God's hand. First Peter 1:3-5 equally assures me that I am being kept by the power of God. **Perseverance** is the believer continuing in the faith. There is tremendous misunderstanding concerning perseverance. Perseverance is **NOT** about you, but about God working in you and through you to those around you. Consider the wording of Philippians 2:12, 13.

12 "work out your salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."

You do nothing to be saved except believe and you do nothing to stay saved except believe. To sit back and wonder if you are doing enough to be or stay saved is wrong and nothing but legalism. And to wonder whether or not you believe enough is equally foolish. Do you believe God, yes or no? If you do, then you are saved and you are persevering in the faith. We must believe (1 Thess. 5:24; 2 Tim 1:12). We have driven an unfortunate wedge between our justification and our sanctification. Paul never separates our justification from our sanctification. I would like to ask two necessary questions.

1. What does it mean, “To believe?”

First, all you must do to be saved is, “Confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead” (Rom. 10:9). That is the objective data contained in the Scripture. It is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone that one is saved. Nothing can be added to it or subtracted from it. Yet how do I know if someone’s confession of Christ is genuine? The bottom line is I don’t. I can surmise and affirm, but I am not the final judge. This is where we run into difficulty. If someone comes to me seeking Christ and desires to become a follower of the Lamb all I tell them to do is believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. But what does it mean, “To believe?” I believe the Scripture answers that question for us.

- a. **First**, we understand that believing is more than just knowing. James tells us that the demons believe, but are not saved.

James 2:19 You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

- b. **Second**, we understand that believing is more than just affirmation or assent. This we see in the story of the rich young ruler. He affirmed the truth of what Jesus was saying (Matthew 19:16-22), but he was not saved.

Matthew 19:16 And someone came to Him and said, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?" 17 And He said to him, "Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." 18 Then he *said to Him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER; YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY; YOU SHALL NOT STEAL; YOU SHALL NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS; 19 HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER; and YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." 20 The young man *said to Him, "All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?" 21 Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." 22 But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.

- c. **Third**, we understand that believing is to place one’s complete trust in Jesus Christ. This is the language of Paul in 2 Timothy 1:12.

12 For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day.

Here is where I see Mark 8:34-38 fitting in. Jesus just announced His death for the first time at CP. Peter rebukes our Lord, Jesus than adds our paragraph. Jesus says to Peter, “Peter, for you to be saved I must die and if you will be saved you must likewise die.”

Consider the following explanations for believing:

First, I am on a small island with one palm tree. In time I notice the water is rising. Soon my small island will be under water and if help does not arrive I will drown. I think about climbing the tree, but in time even it will be under the water. What I need is a boat. And as providence would have it, I find a boat. But as we have learned knowledge of the boat alone will not save me. I begin to surmise that if I get in the boat I can be saved, but chose not to. Alas I am still in harms way. It is only when I get into the boat that my life is saved. So it is with one’s profession of faith. Knowledge of Jesus Christ alone will not save. Knowing He saves will not save you, it is only when you surrender all that you are to Him and “get into the boat” that you will be saved.

Second, I am weary, tired, exhausted and I need to rest. But I can find nowhere to rest. Alas I see a chair. Knowledge of the chair alone will not give me rest. I consider the chair and believe that if I trust the chair to hold my weight it will give me rest, but I chose not to sit so I find no rest. Finally, I recognize the chairs existence and its distinct purpose and thus I sit on the chair putting upon it my full weight. It is only than that I find rest. Now how do I know that you truly believe the chair will hold your full weight and give you rest, by seeing you resting in the chair? If you tell me all about the chair and the unique qualities of the chair, but I never see you resting in the chair, I will have my doubts as to whether or not you really believe the chair will do what you claim it does.

Third, you offer me a pen as a gift. I have knowledge of the gift, I know and understand that you are offering me the pen as a gift, but it is not mine until I take it. I can see the gift and have a knowledge of the gift, but until I take the gift, it will not become mine (John 1:12; Romans 6:23; Eph. 2:8).

Unfortunately, the majority of professing Christians have knowledge of God and believe He saves sinners, but they have not put their full trust in Him.

2. “How do I know you are saved?”

The only way I know you are saved is by your profession of faith and your pattern in life. This is where James 2:14-25 comes in.

¹⁴ What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? **Can that faith save him?** ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? ¹⁷ **Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.** ¹⁸ But someone may well say, "**You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my**

faith by my works." ¹⁹ You believe that God is one. You do well; **the demons also believe, and shudder.** ²⁰ But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? ²² **You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected;** ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴ **You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.** ²⁵ In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶ For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also **faith without works is dead**" (James 2:14-26).

I believe James 2:14-25 compliments our current passage and shows how justification (i.e., "faith") and sanctification (i.e., "works") are inseparably linked. You cannot speak of one without the other.

The Galatians were turning back to that which they were saved from. Paul uses the word **epistrephe**. It is a word that is used repeatedly of one's conversion to Christ.

Acts 3:19 "Therefore repent and **return**, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord;

Acts 11:21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed **turned** to the Lord.

Acts 14:15 and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should **turn** from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM.

Acts 15:19 "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are **turning** to God from among the Gentiles,

Acts 26:18 to open their eyes so that they may **turn** from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.' ²⁰ but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and **turn** to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.

1 Thess. 1:9 For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you **turned** to God from idols to serve a living and true God,

The Galatian believers were "converting" back to their former way of thinking and life. They were going back to shadows that spoke of the substance ("days, weeks, months"). Paul found this completely unacceptable and incompatible with saving faith. There are a host of passages dealing with this area. I would like us to consider four of them.

1. Hebrews 6:4-9

Perhaps one of the most difficult passages to handle is Hebrews 6. The language leaves very little wiggle room. It is very graphic and telling. However verses 7 and 8 assist us in unraveling the dilemma. Why is some seed productive and other seed unproductive? It is because of the soil type. Such a thought forces us to move to Matthew 13:18-23.

What is the difference between a Judas and a Peter? The difference is found in repentance and perseverance. Both had betrayed the Lord Jesus and apart from the divine record we would not know what had happened to either one.

2. Matthew 13:18-23

Here we find four types of soil. The first three types of soil receive the seed but do not persevere. Such soil is unproductive. If the soil in verse 23 is described as “good,” then I would conclude that the first three soils are “bad.” Chapter 12 of Matthew gives us several contrasts. Jesus clearly draws a line between two distinct groups. Some people will receive Him as Savior and others will not. The parable of the soils reveal for us why this is so. Only the saved soil receives the Word and produces abiding or lasting fruit. It is only the saved soil that perseveres.

Perhaps an even clearer picture is found in 2 Peter 2:18-22.

3. 2 Peter 2:18-22

The language employed by Peter stands in parallel to that of Hebrews 6. The conclusion Peter gives is clearer than that of Hebrews 6:7-8. If I find a human acting like a pig, what is he? A human! Why, because that is what he is by nature. If I find a monkey acting like a human, what is it? A monkey! Why, because that is what it is by nature. It is unnatural for a human to act like a pig, but it is possible. John tells us that those who have the seed of God in them do not practice sin (1 John 3:4-10). There is a world of difference between a point in time and a pattern of life. We are all, as believers, capable of committing the most grievous sins known to man, but (and this is a huge contrast) believers do not practice sin. It is not what patterns our lives (i.e., holding your breath, you will pass out, but you will continue to breathe and you will revive).

4. 2 Corinthians 13:5-6

Paul finds himself in the same situation with the Corinthian church as he did with the Galatian church. What is Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthian church? “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!” What is even more startling is when this is seen in light of 1 Corinthians 1:30.

30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption,

How can Paul say this, “because within any given body of believers there will be pretenders.”

C. Their Perilous Problem (4:9b-10)

1. They were turning to legalism (4:9b)
2. They were longing to be slaves (4:9c)
3. They were observing ritualistic feasts (4:10)

The question is, Which calendar is it that Paul fears them to observe, or perhaps more accurately, to be considering to observe? Interpreters have taken it to be the Jewish framework for time-keeping. I don't. Look closely at the language. It describes the idolatrous calendar of the Romans (“days, months, seasons, years”), not that of the Jews (days, *weeks*, months, seasons, years). The Jews were the only people of the time to observe a seven day cycle—*weeks*, which is conspicuously absent from Paul's description! The Jewish calendar is built around the story of creation, of God's seven day cycle. The Roman calendar is built around the imperial gods and their representative on earth, Caesar. In other words, it is not merely a vague analogy between turning (again) to idolatry and observation of a calendar, but a direct reference to a calendar that turns around idol worship.

<http://www.marknanos.com/Boston-Torah-Obs-5-9-05.pdf>

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D. Paul's Present Perplexity (v. 11).

Paul was shocked to learn of the Galatians' desire to go back into bondage. It is the same kind of statement we read in 1:6, “I am amazed.”

Paul was “Seized with alarm.” He uses the word, **phobeo**. It is our English word “Phobia.” Paul says he labored to the point of exhaustion in seeking to bring the Galatians to faith. He now asks a penetrating question “Was all of this work without cause?”

"Bestowed labor" = to work to utter exhaustion. It is the word **kopiao**.

Matthew 11:28 Come unto me, all ye that **labor** and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Luke 5:5 And Simon answering said unto him, Master, we have **toiled** all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net.

John 4:6 Now Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being **wearied** with his journey, sat thus on the well: and it was about the sixth hour.

Paul was afraid that his work/labor would be without purpose or without cause (vain). Paul's imagery is very graphic. **It is the mother who carries a child full term and goes through labor only to give birth to a stillborn child.** Oh the anguish and heartache, the sorrow and grief. Yet this is Paul concerning the Galatians.

The question that must be asked is this, "Is Paul addressing the issue of believers who are in disobedience or unbelievers who faked faith and were now showing their true colors?"

We do not know nor can we know. The author of Hebrews concludes his comments in chapter 6 with these words, "But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way."

"God has acts; we have tasted the effect of that action. If we go back now, we are denying not only ourselves and our Christian experience, but God himself." (Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 51).

Shepherding the Sheep: (What's the NEXT STEP?)

1. Assuming that "basic principles of the world" refers to the Galatians' pre-Christian religious beliefs, can you think of how religious beliefs not based on Christ can cause one to be "enslaved" or "in bondage?"
2. "Once saved always saved" that is the consistent message of the New Testament.
3. It is equally true that, "Faith alone saves, but faith is never alone." The life you live is not a cause for salvation, but the life you live is a consequence of your salvation.
4. Fruit bearing is not a work, but a result.
5. I do not try to 'act' saved, I am saved so I will inevitably live like a saved person.
6. I do not believe the Christian life is an obligation to be kept, but rather it is the outworking of life.
7. Only living people have a pulse. A pulse does not give life; a pulse is a sign of life. "Works" are the pulse of faith never a cause or maintainer of life.
8. It will never be my intent to create doubt. Paul has just told his audience in 4:7 that they are heirs. If this is true, then why would they be looking back? Was Paul's labor in vain? What typically happens in a situation like this is that those who are sincere and fruit bearers have a tendency to examine themselves whereas those who really need to examine themselves sit snugly in their unbelief.
9. Are you saved? Yes or No. If you are, rejoice and thank God. Continue in your walk with God. If you are not saved, then perhaps today is your day set by the Father to be received as a son and heir?