

“Love for a Church”

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Galatians 4:8–20 (ESV)

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

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.¹

Everybody wants to love and be loved. That’s what a lot of popular songs have taught me. Some of you may know a song sung by Nat King Cole called “Nature Boy.” (It was also sung in the 2001 movie, *Moulin Rouge*.) The last line of the song says, “The greatest thing you’ll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return.” There’s a song by Solomon Burke that appeared in the movie, *The Blues Brothers*, called “Everybody Needs Somebody to Love.” Perhaps you can recall many other love songs that express similar sentiments.

I think it’s true that we all want to be loved, and to love someone else. We want to be loved by someone who truly knows us. We might even say we want to be loved by someone in spite of the fact that they know all our flaws and quirks. I think part of what makes us human is a need for deep relationships marked by love.

Yet when we talk about love, we often sentimentalize it. We make love into merely a feeling. We feel that we love someone else. We fall in and out of love. In popular belief, if love

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

is an action, and not just a feeling, it's about making someone else happy. It's about pleasing the other person.

But is that love? I would define love as trying to give another person what is best for him or her. And I think that true love is related to what you think is the most important thing, or the best thing. So loving someone involves knowing what is best, or what is ultimate, and it involves action—trying to give a person what is best. If you think personal happiness is the most important thing, then if you really want to love another person, you'll do anything to make that person happy, and you'll avoid doing anything to make that person feel bad.

But is personal happiness the most important thing? How do we define happiness? Happiness probably means different things to different people. It's hard to pin down just what happiness is. It's a feeling, and like any other feeling, it can come and go. Can we really say that happiness is the most important thing if we don't even know how to define it?

The Bible says that the most important thing isn't a feeling. The Bible says that the most important thing is knowing God. When Jesus prayed to God the Father, he said, "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). Knowing God leads to eternal life. There's nothing more important than that, is there? If that's true, then what does that have to do with love? If knowing God is the most important thing, then if you love someone else, you will do your best to help that person know God. And, of course, you will want that person to know God truly.

Knowing God is more than knowing just facts about him. Of course, if you know God in a personal way, you will know facts about him. You have to. That's how real relationships work. Imagine you had never met me before, and I told you I was married. And then imagine that you asked me about my wife. You ask where she was born, where she went to school, what she's done for work, and what she likes and dislikes. What would you think if I didn't know the answers to those questions? You would probably doubt that I was married.

That's how it is with God. If we have a real relationship, we'll know facts about him. We'll know what he's like, what he's done, what he likes and dislikes, and how to relate to him. If we know God, we'll know that we have rebelled against him by doing what is wrong. If we know God, we'll know that the only way to have a relationship with him is through his Son, Jesus. If we know God and Jesus, we'll know who Jesus is, what he did, and how he alone can save us from our own sin and God's righteous punishment of that sin. If we truly know God,

we'll know that nothing else but being united to Jesus will save us. And we can only be united to Jesus if we trust him, and him alone, for our salvation.

Paul wrote this letter of Galatians to a group of people that he introduced to Jesus. He was the first one to preach the good news about Jesus to them, and when he told them the message of Christianity, they believed him. Yet after Paul left, some other people came in and told the Galatians a different message. They told the Galatians that they had to obey the law given to the Israelites in order to be in a right relationship with God. This involved circumcision for the men, observing certain dietary laws, and also observing Jewish holy days. And it seems the Galatians started to believe this "other gospel." When Paul found out about this, he was concerned. In fact, he was angry. Why? Because he knew what was at stake: if the Galatians didn't really know God, they wouldn't have eternal life. So he wrote a letter that tried to correct their false beliefs.

What we see in this passage is that Paul loves the Galatians. He cares about them. He's concerned that they might be going the wrong way, so he pleads with them. This is true love.

Let's look at the first four verses, 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.

Before the Galatians knew God—before they believed the gospel that Paul preached to them—they were enslaved. Since they were Gentiles living in the Roman Empire, they probably worshiped false gods, idols. These idols were not true gods, because there really is only one God.² And they were enslaved because these idols didn't bring them freedom. I suppose there was always another rite to perform, always another sacrifice to make, without assurance that what they were doing would appease their gods.

² In another letter that Paul wrote, 1 Corinthians, he warned the Corinthians about idolatry. He told them that they shouldn't participate in the idolatrous practices of non-Christians. They shouldn't be involved in the sacrifices made by pagans. Paul writes this: "¹⁹ What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons" (1 Cor. 10:19-20). See also Deuteronomy 32:17, which says false gods are really demons.

When we look at some of Paul's other letters, we get a sense of what he's talking about here. In 1 Thessalonians, he tells the Thessalonians that they "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1Thess. 1:9b-10). False gods have no life in them, but the true God is alive. Jesus rose from the dead and he alone delivers us from judgment.

In another one of Paul's letters, Titus, Paul provides a great summary of salvation. This is Titus 3:3-7:

³ For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. ⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Before we came to Christ, we all were slaves to various sinful passions. But when Jesus, who is God, came, he saved us, not because of anything we've done, but because he had mercy on us, and he caused us to be born again into new creatures who have the third person of God, the Holy Spirit, living inside of us. We are now justified, which means we are declared innocent because Jesus' death paid for our sins, and we are credited with his perfection.

Paul says that the Galatians had come to know God. Then he corrects himself and says that they had come to be known by God. Why does Paul say this? I think the answer is that the most important thing is who God knows. God knows his people. They are the ones with whom he has a relationship. If he knows you, you're good with him. You're in. Imagine this: you go to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C. That's the address of the White House. You walk up as far as you can go until you get to security. When the Secret Service ask you what you're doing, you say, "I'm here to see the President. I know him." Are they going to let you in? Probably not. But what if you get to the security point and the President appears and says, "I know him" or "I know her"? In that case, you would be let in.

With that illustration, and with our relationship with God, we can claim that we know God. But we could be saying something false. We could be lying to ourselves and to other people. But if God knows us, we will know him. A theologian named Doug Moo says, "Humans do indeed come to know God, but they do so only because God first determines to 'know' us in

Christ.”³ It’s like what the apostle John writes: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

Paul thought that the Galatians were known by God. But that’s the problem: we don’t know all that God knows. We don’t know for sure who his people are. We can only look at what others appear to believe and how others appear to live. Paul was now looking at the Galatians, and they were starting to believe this other message, that they had to follow the laws of Moses in order to be right with God. Paul was concerned that maybe they were never known by God in the first place.⁴

The Galatians had started to “turn back to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world.” Last week I said that these “elementary principles of the world” were the elements of creation: earth, wind, fire, air, water, the moon, the sun, and the stars. These things were often associated with idolatry. But the Galatians weren’t in danger of going back to their pagan gods. They were in danger of trying to obey the law of Moses in order to be made right with God. Paul is saying here that that is another form of idolatry. And it, too, enslaves because it crushes people with its expectations. If you rely on your own obedience to be right with God, you’ll always be anxious. You can never find rest. You’ll never know where you really stand with God. Are you good enough now? How about now? You’re constantly performing rites, thinking these things will save you.

That’s why Paul says, in verse 10, “You observe days and months and seasons and years!” He’s referring to Jewish holy days, like the Sabbath, the Day of Atonement, new moon festivals, and festivals like Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. Paul’s point is that now that Jesus has come, he has fulfilled these things. To keep on practicing them is to miss the point. That’s what Paul means in Colossians 2:16-17:

³ Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 276.

⁴ If one is troubled by this idea—that people who appear to be Christians really aren’t—that person should consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:22–23:

²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ ²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

¹⁶Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

All the laws of the Old Testament and all the festivals and worship at the temple and even the Sabbath pointed to Jesus. Now that he has come, not only do we not have to do those things, but it's wrong to insist that we must do them in order to be right with God. That's why Paul compares obedience to the law to idolatry. Both are wrong. And both depend upon what an individual does. They depend upon his or her works. But the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about what he has done to save his people. This message brings freedom because God has done all the work. He's done what is impossible for you and me to do. We don't have to be anxious anymore. Our motivation to do things isn't based on earning something from God. Now, we are motivated because we love God and we are responding to what he has given us freely.

What does this mean for us? Well, it means that truth matters. How we relate to God matters. There are false beliefs and there are right beliefs. Sometimes we're fooled into thinking that as long as someone has faith, they're fine. But what do they have faith in. A wrong belief, not matter if it's held sincerely, is still wrong. Do we know the message of Christianity or not? Do we trust in Jesus for our salvation or are we trusting in something else?

I also think it matters how we think about our worship of God. Some Christians approach worship from an Old Testament mentality. They think of the church building as a temple. They think of this space as a sanctuary. They think of pastors as priests, and so on. But that's missing the point. This building is not a temple. It's not God's house any more than your house is God's house because he owns everything. If you are a Christian, you are a little temple of God, and you are part of the true temple, the body of Christ. If you are a Christian, you are a sanctuary, because the Holy Spirit is living within you. If you are a Christian, you are a priest. You are a royal priest, a priest of the King. And you're a saint, too.

If you come here today thinking that being here will get you into heaven, or into God's good graces, you are wrong. I have to tell you that. None of this earns salvation for you. Salvation is a gift of God. If he has given you that gift, he will have opened your eyes up to the truth. You will recognize the Bible as God's Word. You will know God in the sense that you will have a relationship with him. And if you know God that way, you'll know facts about God, and you'll know how he wants you to live. Your life will be changed.

That's why all of this matters. If the Galatians turned away from the true message of Christianity, the one that Paul taught, they would show that they weren't trusting in Jesus for their salvation. They were trusting in themselves, and their own actions. If we think we need to come here and jump through certain hoops in order to be saved from hell, then we're trusting in ourselves. Trust Jesus. Believe that his death on the cross paid for all of your sins. All of them. There's nothing you should or can add to his sacrifice.

Let's now look at the next few verses:

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.

Paul wanted the Galatians to become like him.⁵ He was a Jew who no longer trusted in doing the law in order to be in the right in God's eyes. When Paul first came to them, he became like them, living like a Gentile in order to reach Gentiles.⁶ Now, Paul wanted them to become like him. He wanted them not to put their faith in their obedience to the law.

When Paul first came to them and preached the gospel, they received him gladly. The reason he preached to them was because some physical ailment kept him there. We really don't know what it was. It may be the same problem as the "thorn in the flesh" that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 12:7. Some theologians speculate that it could have been some problem with his eyes, because he says the Galatians would have gouged out their eyes to give to him. At the end of this letter, we also learn that Paul wrote in large letters (Gal. 6:11). He probably dictated most of the letter to a secretary. So perhaps he had a particularly bad eye issue. We don't know. On a side note, this is proof that sometimes what looks like a setback actually turns out to be part of God's plan. If Paul had never had that bodily ailment, he wouldn't have started churches in Galatia.

But Paul's point here is that at first, the Galatians gladly received him. They could have chose not to listen to an infirmed, strange man talking about a guy who died and came back to life. They might have thought his ailment was proof that he was cursed by God. He was probably

⁵ It's not uncommon for Paul to tell his readers to imitate him. See 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9.

⁶ So 1 Corinthians 9:21: "²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law."

the opposite of the false teachers, who were impressive in person.⁷ But they recognized his message came from God. They received like an angel, like a messenger of God. Actually, they received him like Jesus, because to receive a disciple preaching the gospel is to receive Jesus.⁸ Paul wants to know what happened. They used to bless him, but now they are abandoning his teachings.

That brings us to the last verses in this passage, verses 16-20:

¹⁶Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? ¹⁷They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. ¹⁸It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, ¹⁹my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! ²⁰I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

Paul wants the Galatians to know the truth about Jesus. He knows that the most important thing is that they know God truly. That's why he often speaks of the "truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:5, 14; 5:7). He loves them so much, and he loves God so much, that he's willing to be treated even as an enemy. The false teachers who had come into Galatia after Paul were different. They flattered the Galatians. They made much of them—but they didn't do it for a good purpose. They wanted to "shut" the Galatians "out." This may mean that they wanted the Galatians excluded from Paul's ministry. Ironically, if the Galatians believed these false teachers, they would be shut out of God's people. The reason the false teachers did this is because they wanted the Galatians to make much of them. They wanted the Galatians to hang on their every word, and to idolize their teaching.

I think there's an important lesson here. False teachers often teach things that people want to hear. And they want the people they teach to make much of them. Often, this comes in the form of money. False teachers bring messages that will earn them money and/or fame. And the message is more about their celebrity and abilities than about God. Paul, on the other hand, was willing to risk offending the Galatians. That's why he says some pretty harsh things in this letter. If Paul were trying to butter them up, or scratch their itching ears with some nice words, he wouldn't do that.

⁷ That appears to be the case in 2 Corinthians, where Paul compares himself to so-called "super-apostles." See 2 Cor. 10:10.

⁸ Matthew 25:31-46 says this. Those who receive "the least of these my brothers" have received Jesus and will inherit the kingdom of God. Those who have rejected "the least of these" have rejected Jesus and stand condemned.

Sometimes, we need to take a risk when we talk to people about Jesus. I think we're all so afraid of offending our relatives and our friends and our neighbors that we don't say anything. We're afraid of being rejected. We're afraid that people will think we're being unloving. But you have to remember this: real love is not always giving people what they want. Instead, it's giving people what they need. We don't always want what we need. What we need doesn't always make us feel happy. We need to love people so much that we're willing to risk offending them. That doesn't mean we should be jerks. We need to communicate the gospel in a gracious and winsome way. But we should take risks.

I have a friend who says, "We can love people to hell." He's using "love" in an ironic way. If we really loved people, we would plead with them like Paul. We would tell them that the only way to escape hell is faith in Jesus. That's love. And we need to love people even if some people reject us.

I just finished reading Augustine's *Confessions*. It's a classic book, something like a cross between a prayer to God, personal memoirs, and a theological treatise. Augustine is one of the great theologians in church history and he wrote this book at the end of the fourth century. I thought this quote was very appropriate: "If I were given the choice of being universally admired, though mad or wholly wrong, or of being universally abused, though steadfast and utterly certain in possessing the truth, I see which I should choose."⁹ He would choose the truth, of course, even if it cost him universal admiration, even if it meant suffering insults. He would rather hold on to the truth and be viewed as a fool than believe in a lie and be highly regarded by everyone. Real love is always connected to truth.

Look at Paul's words. He loves the Galatians. He compared his work to the work of a mother in childbirth.¹⁰ He was doing everything he could to see that the Galatians were really Christians. He was suffering so that they could be re-born spiritually.¹¹ (In other places, Paul refers to himself as a father of the Christians he disciplined.¹²) He wanted to make sure that Jesus was being formed in them. He wanted them to become like him when he said earlier, in Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified in Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Paul wanted to be with the Galatians in person, and he wished that he could use a gentler

⁹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), X.xxxvii, 215.

¹⁰ Cf. 1 Thess. 2:7.

¹¹ His suffering consisted of his anxiety for all the churches he had planted (2 Cor. 11:28-29).

¹² 1 Cor. 4:15; 1 Thess. 2:11; Philemon 10.

tone. But he knew that what he was writing about was so important that he had to get their attention. He risked offending them in order to teach them the truth about Jesus, because he loved them.

How could Paul do this? Paul could take such risks because of the gospel. He knew that he was acceptable to God on the basis of Jesus' works. That was the most important thing for Paul. He knew that if the Galatians rejected his message, this wouldn't completely shake his world. Nothing Paul could do could separate him from the love of God. He was secure in his identity. Pastor Tim Keller writes, "The gospel frees us from the need for people's approval and adoration so that we can confront and anger the people we love if that is what is best for them. And although it does not always work, this is the only kind of communication that really changes people. If you love a person so selfishly that you cannot risk their anger, you won't ever tell them the truth they need to hear."¹³ Of course, we must speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). We must plead the way that Paul does. And we do this not because we're hung up on some ideology, but because these truths matter. They have eternal consequences.

Who will you tell these truths to? Think of a particular person in your life. Pray for that person. Consider meeting up with that person, or writing that person a letter. We need to plead with others to believe in the truth of the gospel.

¹³ Timothy Keller, *Galatians for You* (The Good Book Company, 2013), 114.