XI. The Perplexed Pastor

March 21/22, 2012 Galatians 4:12-20

**Aim:** To understand that the goal of pastoral ministry is not to gain personal followers, but to form believers into Christlikeness.

The apostles’ approach changes dramatically in verse 12; there now follows a poignant personal plea by the apostle. Paul suddenly adopts a very personal approach, sound as though his feelings have been hurt by the behavior of the Galatians. His words at this point are full of pathos. In fact verses 12-20 are the strongest words of personal affection Paul uses in any of his letters. As he often does, the apostle opens his heart. He does not so much preach or teach as simply pour out his heart in personal exhortation. He wants to assure them of his love; he writes as a pastor, exposing his affections so that they will understand his motivation.

**A. Paul Remembers His Past with the Galatians (Gal. 4:12-16)**

Paul looks back to how they responded to him when he brought the gospel to them. He has just reminded the Galatians of what they had been before their conversion (4:8). Now, he is asking them to remember how things were between Paul and them before the Judaizers poured doubt on the apostle’s theology.

1. **Reproducing Paul (4:12)**

*Brethren, I urge you to become like me, for I became like you. You have not injured me at all.*

When Paul addresses them as ‘brethren,’ he is declaring that he thought more highly of them than they might infer from his previous statements. He embraces them as fellow members of the body of Christ. His example reminds pastors that in their pastoral work there always must be a distinction between probing, searching application and scolding. A minister is not to scold God’s people. Even when he must speak urgently and vehemently, he must never forget that he is speaking to God’s people.

Paul is saying, in effect: become like me to the extent that I now, by the grace of God, reflect something of Jesus Christ. They saw Jesus-likeness in Paul. Paul’s appeal that they become ‘like him’ is meant to be an appeal for Jesus-likeness. The Galatians had nothing by way of a New Testament to help them learn what godliness looked like. No Gospels, no letters of Paul or John – only this letter that Paul is now writing. How could Paul best convey to them the shape of Christlikeness other than by saying, ‘Be like me, as I am like Jesus’?

They must follow him in renouncing Jewish ceremonies and in embracing the righteousness that is found in Christ alone. Paul was free from trying to earn salvation by keeping the law and free from having to live by its outward symbols, ceremonies, rituals, and restrictions. The Jewish believers in Galatia knew well that Paul had abandoned his former subservience not only to rabbinic traditions but even to the ceremonial law of Moses. Yet now they were being intimidated by the Judaizers into returning to their former bondage under the law. ‘I introduced you to freedom,’ Paul was saying, ‘don’t turn back to slavery.’

For his own part, the apostle had no interest in having his own disciples. The only disciples he had any interest in were the kind that follow Christ. Galatians 4:12 is Paul’s mission statement. He knew how to contextualize the gospel. He knew how to become so integrated into the life of...
a community that he could explain the gospel in words that people could actually understand. This is the strategy Paul followed when he first visited the Galatians. He entered into their lives so thoroughly that he practically became a Galatian himself. In particular, he was careful not to follow any Jewish cultural practices that might have hindered his evangelism among Gentiles. This is the model every Christian should follow in doing evangelistic work. Without compromising the gospel, we should become as much like the people we are trying to reach as we possibly can. Our real goal is to make people become like us (insofar as we are like Christ), but first we have to become like them. Paul knew how to do this. He became like the Galatians in order to help the Galatians become like him.

When he came to them he did not live among them as a Jew. Culturally, he became like them in every way he could (with moral and biblical integrity) in order to minister to them. But more importantly, he came among them renouncing Judaistic righteousness. Therefore he says, ‘Don’t begin to mimic Jews, but rather follow my example.’ In making this plea, Paul puts his reputation on the line. In effect, he tells the Galatians that they must choose between himself and the Judaizers. This takes pastoral courage, for what happens if they make the wrong choice?

Paul wants to clear away any notion that he has a grudge against them and asserts that he is not speaking out of vindictiveness: ‘You have done me no wrong.’ They not only had done him no wrong but had openly and lovingly received him while he was in extremely adverse personal circumstances.

2. Receiving Paul (4:13-15)

You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus. What then was the blessing you enjoyed? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me.

   a) Infirmity (4:13-15)

The wording in the original text suggests that Paul’s infirmity, whatever it may have been, was the reason why he went to their cities in the first place. However, there is nothing in Acts to suggest that sickness affected Paul’s movements when he was evangelizing these regions of Asia Minor. He probably meant nothing more here than he preached to them while suffering some affliction. This illness sounds something like the famous ‘thorn in the flesh’ that tormented Paul for more than a decade, which he mentions in 2 Corinthians 12.

Paul is ambiguous as to the nature of his infirmity (literally, weakness of the flesh). It seems most likely that Paul is alluding to some kind of disease, or temporary sickness from which he was suffering during this period – what he calls a ‘bodily ailment.’ There are some clues in this letter as to what form of sickness this took. The mention of the fact that the Galatians did not react with scorn or disdain implies that it was potentially repulsive. The fact that the Galatians were prepared to gouge out their eyes and give them to him suggests that Paul may well have been suffering from a disease that rendered him visually impaired. This is supported by 6:11 – is the apostle saying he had to write in large letters because he could not see to write in small ones? All this made the apostle appear most ill, disfigured in some way, ‘a man of sorrows.’ However, most commentators regard this as mere speculation.

On his first missionary journey Paul apparently either became seriously ill while in Galatia or else went there to recuperate. Some suggest that he contracted malaria while traveling through
the low, swampy regions of Pamphylia and decided to go up into the higher and healthier area of Galatia and minister there for a while until he was better (see Acts 13:13-14). Although malaria can be terribly painful and debilitating, those effects are not continuous. If Paul did have that disease, he would still have been able to do some preaching and teaching between attacks of fever and pain. This explanation is plausible.

Many interpret his remarks as references to an eye disease, suggesting that his eyes ran and were ugly and unattractive. The reference to ‘weakness of the flesh’ could be to some physical affliction. It seems, however, when we look at the historical context, we ought to interpret the phrase more broadly. The entire ministry in southern Galatia during the first missionary journey was marked by intense persecution, bodily weakness, and affliction of the flesh. In Lystra they stoned him and left him for dead! (Acts 14:19).

Whatever Paul’s sickness was, there are valuable lessons to be learned from it. One is that God uses our problems to achieve His purpose. The apostle Paul did not particularly enjoy his illness. If Corinthians is any indication, there were times when he pleaded with God to restore his health and strength. Yet in God’s perfect providence, those requests were never granted. Instead, Paul’s infirmity became God’s opportunity. God used it to demonstrate how His power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). He made it the occasion for reaching the Galatians with the gospel of free grace. Thus there was much to be gained through Paul’s illness, however unfortunate it seemed at the time.

b) Welcome (4:14-15)

The other lesson to be learned from Paul’s condition has to do with how we receive God’s Word. We are to welcome it with the warmest hospitality. Whatever Paul’s illness or injury may have been, it was unsightly, perhaps even visually repulsive. As a result, it would have been easy for the Galatians to be turned off by Paul’s appearance. His deformity actually posed a temptation for them. Here it helps to know that most ancient Greeks considered disease and disability to be signs of divine displeasure, or even demonic influence. However unattractive Paul may have been, the Galatians did not reject him. Rather than treating him as if he had a demon, they greeted him like an angel. Indeed, they gave him the kind of welcome they would have given to Christ Himself. The reason for their warm welcome was not so much that they loved Paul as it was that they loved God’s Word. Therefore, they received his ministry the way God’s children always receive their Father’s Word with real joy.

Whatever the nature of Paul’s disability, it must have been self-evident. It was also of a kind that would normally have evoked rejection and loathing, otherwise he would not have commented on the fact that they ‘did not despise or reject’ it. The Greek term behind ‘despise’ means to count as nothing or worthless, and the term behind ‘loath’ literally means ‘to spit,’ which was often done as an act of contempt. Paul was treated neither as worthless nor with contempt.

In ancient times, without benefit of good medicines, sterile bandages, and other such modern care, diseases were often disfiguring and their stench nauseating. To most ancients, including Jews, physical affliction was considered a form of divine judgment (cp. Jn. 9:2; Job 4:7-8; Acts 28:3-4). The fact that Paul’s affliction was not a barrier to his credibility either to the Jews or Gentiles of Galatia was totally unexpected. They had no doubt that he was God’s messenger and the apostolic representative of the Lord Jesus and were grateful beyond measure for the blessing of spiritual life they had received because of his ministry (cp. Acts 13:48).
Far from rejecting the apostle, they welcomed him as a messenger (an angel) of God. Paul reminds them that they responded not to the man, but to the message; he was the messenger of God. They esteemed him in spite of all appearances. So closely did they identify the preacher with the Savior he proclaimed, that the received him as ‘Christ Jesus’ Himself. As they looked at Paul, they did not see an infirm stranger, but only the messenger of Christ.

What Paul is suggesting is that they had received him as they would have received Jesus. They saw Jesus-likeness in Paul. There may be another aspect to the Galatian welcome of the apostle ‘as Christ Jesus.’ Paul may well have reminded them of Jesus, as to what they knew of His physical condition. Their impressions of Jesus would have been of a man accustomed to suffering. There was something about Paul that reminded them of this. The apostle came into the region of Galatia with the marks of suffering.

This passage reminds us that when the gospel is preached in power, those who proclaim it are obscured by the glory of Christ. This is the exact opposite of much modern expectation, where success is commonly measured by the fame and prominence of the messenger.

c) Blessing (4:15)

Why does Paul dwell upon the way they received him at the beginning? Because the apostle was inseparably identified with the gospel that he preached. He invites them to remember the blessing they had once received by heeding his message. Makarismos (‘blessing’) can also be translated ‘happiness’ or ‘satisfaction’ and implies a feeling of joy, fulfillment, and contentedness. Literally, the Galatians ‘counted themselves happy’ when they first heard the good news about Jesus Christ. Should they not now, again, pay attention to his words, that they might again be blessed?

Paul’s statement about plucking out their eyes was obviously hyperbole. It does not necessarily mean that Paul was visually impaired. It may have had nothing to do with his eyesight at all. In the ancient world, a man’s eye was considered his most valuable possession. When Paul says the Galatians would have given him their eyeballs, he means they would have done anything for him.

The reference to plucking out their eyes gave rise to the interpretation that Paul suffered from an eye disease. The eye, however, is the most tender and affectionate part of the body. Paul could be saying that they loved him so much that they gladly would have sacrificed the tenderest part of their body on his behalf.

Paul may simply have been using a common figure of speech, suggesting that the Galatians would have given up their very eyesight, the most precious and irreplaceable of the physical senses, if doing that could have helped him. If, as some interpreters speculate, Paul’s bodily affliction was a form of eye disease, he may here have been referring to the Galatians willingness to have literally exchanged their eyes for his, had such a transplant been possible in those days. Because malaria sometimes attacks the optic nerve, causing loss of color recognition, atrophy, and even blindness, his affliction while in Galatia may have affected the way he saw as well as the way he looked. The possibility of poor eyesight is substantiated by the closing section of the Galatian epistle itself (cp. 6:11). Whatever the specific nature of Paul’s illness, his primary point here is clear: the Galatians had loved him with a love that would have compelled them to make any sacrifice on his behalf.
3. Rejecting Paul (4:16)

*Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?*

After only a short period of time, however, the situation had radically changed. Now Paul asks the question of verse 16 in bewilderment. The Galatian believers who had succumbed to the Judaizing heresy were guilty of spiritual defection.

Unfortunately, the Galatians were starting to turn against Paul. Their hospitality was turning into hostility, presumably because the Judaizers had been denigrating the apostle and denying his gospel. Paul writes to the Galatians, therefore, as a wounded lover. His gospel has not changed. Yet the Galatians were starting to reject the one true gospel. Unwilling to hear the truth, they were treating Paul like an enemy. They very message that first created the bond of their affection for him was starting to cause a rift between them.

He reminds them that he was their beloved, esteemed friend. Were they going to treat him as an enemy, because he has told them the truth about the gospel? Where had their kindness and affection that they had shown the apostle gone? What had happened to their generosity, their self-denial, their expressions of love for him? Why had Paul suddenly become their ‘enemy’? The answer to these questions lies in the activity of the agitators in Galatia.

B. Paul Desires to Be Present Again with the Galatians (Gal. 4:17-20)

Paul also reminds them that he loves them even if he has rebuked them.

1. The Goal of the Judaizers (4:17-18)

*They zealously court you, but for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them. But it is good to be zealous in a good thing always, and not only when I am present with you.*

Paul does not mention his opponents by name, but he is talking about the nefarious Judaizers who came from Jerusalem to contradict his gospel. The Judaizers seem to have envied Paul’s missionary success. What they really wanted was their own disciples, as false teachers always do. So they tried to win the Galatians away from Paul by flattering them and courting their affections.

We are not told exactly what enticements the Judaizers offered to the Gentile believers, but they obviously took pains to sell their wares. It was true that the false teachers were courting them. But why? They sought to build themselves up at Paul’s expense. They sought to erect a wall between Paul and the church in Galatia, because they wanted the people’s loyalty. They slammed shut the door of gospel liberty because they wanted popularity.

The term translated ‘seek’ or ‘court’ carries the idea of taking a serious interest in someone and was often used of a man courting a woman. ‘The Judaizers talk like they really care for you,’ Paul was saying, ‘but they are false suitors who have no genuine love for or interest in you or your welfare.’

What were the Judaizers trying to shut the Galatians out of? One possibility is that Paul is thinking of the analogy of slavery and liberty that had preceded this section (4:1-7). The Galatians had tasted freedom but were now back in bondage again. They were no longer allowed to roam freely in the terrain of God’s sons. They were shut out from the true liberty that
belongs to the children of God. The view that makes the most sense in this passed is the one that understands the agitators as trying to exclude the Galatian Christians from having fellowship with Paul. Such an interpretation ties in with the very personal (and emotional) way Paul has been phrasing things in the preceding verses. They were trying to shut them out of fellowship with the apostle so that they might ‘make much of them [the agitators].’ This is a love-triangle, and Paul has been jilted for another!

The Judaizers had no interest in the Galatian believers beyond entrapping them in legalism. Their true wish and objective was to ‘shut out’ the Galatians from God’s grace and gain recognition and acceptance for themselves (‘that you may seek them’).

The Judaizers’ purpose is to isolate the Galatians so that these believers will become their own disciples, looking to them alone for teaching and guidance. In particular, they seek to cut off all communication between the Galatians and Paul, who is represented as the arch enemy. It is a common ploy for those who seek a following, and desire the pre-eminence, to isolate their would-be disciples from outside influences. By contrast, a robust Christianity requires no protective isolation. Believers who are properly taught in the Word of God can themselves discern truth from error, spiritual food from spiritual poison.

We learn here something of the pathology of false teachers. They present themselves in such a way so as to build a following among God’s people. A true pastor does not seek his own, but God’s glory and the well-being of those to whom he ministers. False teachers bask in the sunlight of attention when they are present, but when they move on they could not care less about the people they have left. For this reason Paul points out that even when he is apart from them he longs for their well-being. Here he expresses pure pastoral love, a love that always seeks the best for the beloved.

Paul warned against the Judaizers not because they opposed him and personally wounded him, but because they opposed the glorious, saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Now that Paul is no longer with them, they are being seduced by another’s attentions. And Paul wants their affection, ‘not only when I am present with you,’ but also when he was not.

2. The Goal of the Apostle (4:19-20)

   a) Paul’s Labor Pains (4:19)

My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you...

Once more he appeals to their affections. He was not arguing like a lawyer before a skeptical jury but pleading like a parent to a wayward child. ‘Little children’ is from Teknion, a diminutive that was used figuratively as a term of special attention. Literally it referred to a small child. He calls them ‘my little children,’ as a parent might do. After all, Paul had been the instrument by which they had become children of God! He had been there at their birth to new life and freedom. And Paul uses the most intimate language of all: that of a mother giving birth.

The Galatian believers were extremely dear to Paul but were acting like infants who refused to be born. ‘You have already experienced the new birth, but now you are acting as if you need to be spiritually born all over again. You make me feel like a mother who has to deliver the same baby twice.’

Paul did not avoid the pain of dealing with the Galatians. Good pastor as he was, he was prepared to know both pain and joy in his care for Christ’s flock. He viewed his pain as
productive and purposeful. His suffering was not the pain of the terminally ill, but of the mother in labor. By the will of God, it would issue in a joyful outcome, for Christ would be formed in them.

He had once before labored to this end, when he had first preached the gospel in Galatia. Now he must ‘labor in birth again’ to turn them back from error. But his purpose is always the same, namely that Christ should be ‘formed’ in them. The difference between the Judaizers and Paul could not be more plain. They sought disciples for themselves; Paul sought to espouse the Galatians to Christ. There is a question here for all Christian leaders and pastors. What is our ambition for our churches and members? Is it to build up a loyal following for ourselves, or to build up believers in Christ? Paul’s desire is clear. Christ must be ‘formed’ in the believer.

What Paul longs for most of all is their Christlikeness, here rendered as ‘Christ being formed in you.’ The verb ‘formed’ (morphoō) carries the idea of essential form rather than outward shape, and therefore refers to Christlike character. Christlikeness is the goal of the believer’s life. We are born so that we may be a new creation in Christ. The pastor’s heart of the apostle is thereby revealed.

The apostle’s ultimate goal was to see Christ take shape in the lives of His people, to see Christ ‘formed’ in them. This ought to the goal of every pastor: not the favor of men, but the formation of Christ.

Paul bares the heart of a true pastor; he struggles for his people as a woman in labor. He struggled with them in this letter, that Christ might be formed in them. His language reminds us that the ministry is daily giving birth. Pastors are like mothers giving birth and they must labor and travail over the lost and over the sheep that Christ has given to them.

b) Paul’s Doubts (4:20)

…I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you.

The apostle anticipates a happy outcome, but he cannot be sure. He hardly knew what more to say or how to say it, because he was so ‘perplexed about’ them. This verb (aporeomai) means to be at one’s wits’ end. He could not understand how they could have been taught the gospel so well, believed it so genuinely, and then appeared to have forsaken it so quickly (cp. 1:6).

It is though the apostle regarded these Galatian Christians as mere embryos, not yet fully born; fragile and delicate and in need of his protection. He wishes he could be with them. Paul loves these Galatians immensely. He may be at his wit’s end, ‘perplexed’ by what is going on among them, hurt by the ambivalence of their love toward him. But far more than that, they are brothers – children. He feels a responsibility towards them of a maternal kind – and nothing is stronger than that!

Paul sees himself as a spiritual parent in two senses: he was instrumental in their conversion, and responsible for their nurture. Now he longs to be present with them to discharge more effectively his parental responsibility. If he could be there, how promptly he would deal with those who threatened their spiritual safety! How firmly he would discipline them, not with the commandments of men, but by instruction in the truth! How graciously he would nurture them with the food of the Word! How quickly he would change his tone of disapproval to one of commendation!
Galatians – Lesson 11

Because he loves them, he longs to be there in order to protect them from the false teachers. He regrets having to deal roughly with them, but he is perplexed that they are willing to listen to the legalists. Hence, Paul uses arguments of affection to win back the Galatians.

For next time: Read Galatians 4:21-31.