

In our passage today, Paul gets down to one of the root causes of the Galatians acceptance of those who were teaching religious rules. **Ritual is easier than relationship!** Relationships require self-sacrifice and results in preferring others above yourself. Ritual can be a task that is quickly accomplished so you can get on with whatever it was you wanted to do. Relationships require constant attention. Paul thought the Galatians had entered into a relationship with him, but most of all with Jesus. He points them back to the wonder and depth of that relationship they experienced when he was with them.

⁸ Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. Galatians 4:8 In John 8:34ⁱ Jesus told us that the one who sins is a slave of sin. We can all say that we were slaves of sin before we came to Christ. Paul is addressing the Gentiles in the church of Galatia and reminding them of their commitment to gods such as the mythological gods of Greece and Rome that weren't really gods at all.

Some of our gods were false religions. Like the Gentile Galatians, we felt spiritual while living as we pleased. In many cases there is a price tag for "secret wisdom." Some of these religions even claim to be Christian, but don't require you to die to self, just attend and give. They don't want *you* hearing from God as you read your Bible. They will tell you what the Bible says, and don't you dare question their interpretation. They want to be the only voice you hear. Instead of you learning to hear the Great Shepherd's voice and following His leading, they will tell you what you should do for God. Instead of carefully explaining God's Word and encouraging you to search out God's Word on your own (Acts 17:11ⁱⁱ), they will tell you what you should believe.

There are also the other false gods of self and the teaching that you that your truth is to be discovered in your heart. You are the arbitrator of truth. But they claim they can help you advance spiritually by taking their classes or healing of your aura - for a price. Never mind that your truth contradicts everyone else's. It is your truth, and you can change it if it becomes inconvenient. To that I say, "How convenient!" Imagine playing a game where each player has their own rules. Chaos! Being our own god is enslavement to selfishness and ego. Those are the gods 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? Galatians 4:9 We love God because He first loved us (1 John 4:19ⁱⁱⁱ). Intimacy with God through the Holy Spirit was experienced by the Galatians, but they were turning back to the old patterns. They went back to things they were comfortable with, rituals that fit into the culture, with a little Jesus on the side. Just a few rules from Judaism and add in a little paganism and they could avoid persecution! They forsook their intimacy with Jesus, their standing as representatives of the Father, and carrying out His will in the world for mere rituals.

How could we forsake such a blessing? And yet we do just that because our flesh finds it easier to have its way with loopholes we find in the law and ritualistic religion. Routines and rituals aren't as hard on the flesh nature as a living relationship with the Holy Spirit. When rules take priority over Jesus, they become our idols. We don't have to daily crucify the flesh to live with formulas. Jesus spoke of this from Isaiah 29:13.

⁸ "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; Matthew 15:8

Slavery to rituals and rules is the opposite of freedom in Christ (John 8:31,32^{iv}). Look at Islam for example. Islam means submission, but to what are they submitting? It is a set of rules that never changes the heart. Jews did the same thing, submitting to the yoke of the law, but Christ came so we could live in a relationship where we are freed from sin's enslavement *and* laws' orders to rest in Christ and let Him work through us (Matthew 11:28-30^v). How could we walk away from such an honor to go back to rituals?

The born-again person will find an emptiness in methods and rituals because they have experienced real life and know the difference. Rules may be more comfortable to the flesh, but our spirit within will be painfully disturbed and will long for life in the Spirit (Colossians 3:15^{vi}). The longer you surrender to the flesh, the less you will hear the Spirit. That dangerous road leads to a fruitless life (2 Peter 1:8^{vii}).

How can we go down that road if we have come to know God? Life eternal is to know God and Jesus whom He sent (John 17:3^{viii}). But He first came to know us. That is much more than to be aware of who we are, but to have embraced us as His sons and daughters. He has engraved us on the palms of his hands (Isaiah 49:16^{ix}). He is continually interceding for us (Hebrews 7:25^x). He is watching all that we do with loving care. Would we grieve the heart of our loving Father by turning back to what is worthless?

To be known by God, to have been chosen in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4^{xi}), to be kept as the apple of his eye, hidden under the shadow of his wing (Psalm 17:8^{xii}), to have our name written in the Book of Life (Revelation 20:15^{xiii}), to know it's our Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom (Luke 12:32^{xiv})—what utter insanity it would be to turn our back on so generous a God!^{xv}

¹⁰ *You observe days and months and seasons and years!* Galatians 4:10 The Jewish calendar of new moons and sabbaths and feast days were taking the place of walking with Jesus. They Galatians may have included some of their former seasonal cultic practices. We see that being revived in our time with full moon and equinox gatherings that worship creation. Ritual was replacing relationship. There is even one Christian minister who teaches special portals to heaven are opened on certain Jewish holidays. Brothers and sisters, every day with Jesus you have direct access to the throne of God (Hebrews 4:16^{xvi})! Every day is a Holy Day in Christ. Don't fall for this secret wisdom or special revelation. Our God given revelation is the Word of God, and it is clear on most issues.

¹¹ *I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.* Galatians 4:11 Were they truly born-again or had they just changed lifestyles? Paul knew that if they replaced the Spirit with letter of the law or former pagan traditions, they had no spiritual life. That would mean his work there was without fruit that remains (John 15:16^{xvii}). If we talk someone into believing, others can talk them into believing something else. We must introduce people to a living, personal relationship with Jesus that grows deeper as time passes, feeding them the pure spiritual milk of the Word (1 Peter 2:2^{xviii}).

Paul was afraid that all his labor for them was for naught. This isn't the cry of someone who regrets wasting his time. It is the cry of a broken heart that sees those who are dear to him turning down a road to ruin. It is the cry of father seeing his child make a choice in the direction of life that is disastrous. I have shed those tears many times. Sometimes they return to the right path. Others go on to face the consequences of worldliness. I think of the blessings they could have experienced and the suffering they

could have avoided. I can see their faces in my mind. I want to remember all of you with joy and not with grief (Hebrews 13:17^{xix}).

Think for a moment of those who have invested their lives in us. How many prayers have been brought before the throne of heaven for you? How many sermons and classes have been carefully prepared and preached to you? How many well-chosen words have been shared in love with you? Each of us has quite an investment placed in us. No one can fully know how much, for so much has been done in prayer without our knowledge. Think of the grief we would cause if we turned back, not only in those people who invested in us, but of the grief in the heart of your heavenly Father and the Son who gave His life for you (John 15:13^{xx}).

On the other hand, think of the joy you give to God and to those who played a role in your spiritual life when you stand before the throne and hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the Lord" (Matthew 25:23^{xxi}; Thessalonians 2:19,20^{xxii}).

¹² *Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong.* Galatians 4:12 This is a very personal appeal from a concerned heart of love. Paul forsook his Jewish customs becoming as they were when he was with this Gentile church. But now, they are adopting Jewish rituals. When Paul set aside his traditions, it wasn't because the Galatians had a bad influence on him. Rather it was because he did not want them to live by Jewish rules. **He wasn't after a cultural change, but a heart change.** He wanted them to live in Christ and Christ to live in them, which is infinitely greater than conforming to rituals and rules.

One answer to their compromise was to follow the uncompromising Paul as he followed Jesus. When I first read of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ,*" I thought it was arrogant. That is because I didn't know Paul well enough to understand all that meant. Paul was so passionate about the gospel that he tried to please everyone in everything, yet without compromising, so that they might be saved (1 Corinthians 10:33^{xxiii}). Because his whole effort was to communicate the truth of the gospel, he could say of the false teachers 2 Corinthians 11:23-29 ²³ *Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?"*

He had the heart of the Great Shepherd, seeking the lost at any cost, feeding the sheep, and caring for the lambs (Isaiah 40:11^{xxiv}). If you live like Paul did, you can say it too. But few have come close. But that is the challenge he sets before us; be as he is. Be all things to all people to win them to Jesus. **Put Jesus first in everything. That is the theology of the New Testament. It's all about Jesus** – just Jesus. Then the side issues that come along, like keeping the law, or compromising with the world, loses any appeal. It is the crucified life (Galatians 2:20^{xxv}). It is being willing to suffer like Paul was for the

truth of the cross. If we will let the Holy Spirit bring us back to the centrality of that, all our divisions break down and unity thrives (John 17:21^{xxvi}).

¹³ *You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first*, Galatians 4:13 Paul must have picked up malaria or an eye disease in Pamphylia, which explains why he did not preach in the synagogue there. One particular affliction prevalent in that area caused the eyes to bulge which affected vision. Apparently, Paul was recovering in Galatia when he planted the church there. When Paul first proclaimed the gospel to them, they were so appreciative and understanding of the sacrifice Jesus had made for them and the sacrifice Paul was making to share it, that they would have given him their own eyes if they could.

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*. Galatians 4:14 They overlooked his physical condition, even though it was contagious and considered a curse from the gods. They listened to him as if he were an angel sent down from God, or Jesus in the body present with them. Paul referred to these marks of suffering as the marks of Jesus. When we suffer as we proclaim the gospel, we share in Jesus' suffering. The scars on his back reminded the churches of Jesus' suffering.

Not only did they ignore the physical and what was believed to be a spiritual threat, but they were willing to hear a message that was bound to lead to social challenges, even persecution. By abandoning the local gods of community and family, they were targets of blame for any calamities by both Greek and Jewish communities (Hebrews 10:32,33^{xxvii}).

The world is currently in panic mode over the coronavirus variants. Imagine a missionary coming into your community coughing and with a fever trying to share a message that if believed would make you a social outcast. This was the giant step of faith that the Galatians took. No wonder Paul is so amazed at their backsliding.

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*. Galatians 4:15 That blessed condition was being hungry for the truth and ready to make any sacrifice to hear more. Do you have that blessed condition? Paul wrote to the Thessalonians “*And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit*” (1 Thessalonians 1:6). What happened to that blessed condition?

There was some faction within the church that used flattery (4:17^{xxviii}). The language is one of romance, as if they were flirting with the Galatians. They wanted to use the Galatians newfound faith by twisting it in a way that would benefit them. Paul sacrificed to start this church. Did these interlopers ask him if they could teach the flock? Of course not, because they knew he would object. It happens today. People see God moving and try to redirect it for their own glory. The Judaizers were not sacrificially teaching the truth, but instead were selfishly twisting the truth for their gain. Paul sums up the goal of the agitators at the end of the letter. “*It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ*” (6:12, also see Acts 15:1^{xxix} and Romans 16:17,18^{xxx}). They wanted recognition and to avoid persecution.

I believe this verse verifies that the affliction was Paul's eyes. Those who believe that if we have faith God will heal all illness whenever we ask claim that Paul's thorn was persecution (2 Corinthians 12:7-9^{xxxi}). Then he would not be an example of unanswered

prayer for healing. We can easily interpret passages to fit the doctrines we have created, but the Word rightly divided will correct us (2 Timothy 2:15^{xxxii}).

¹⁶ Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? Galatians 4:16 Paul was concerned that now they would shun him and follow the agitators because of this letter of rebuke and correction. Sadly, people often do reject God's messengers because they lovingly address a fault, a false doctrine, or a compromising lifestyle. Some recipients would rather not change, so they reject the messenger as an enemy. I have had to face that rejection. I have also been on the other side, struggling to receive correction.

When someone lovingly brings some correction to you, don't be defensive. Thank them for being willing to risk the relationship out of love (Proverbs 27:6^{xxxiii}). Let them know that you will take it to the Lord and the Word and seek the truth of the matter. In some cases, you may know in your heart that they are right. In that case, ask them to pray with you for victory. On minor differences of doctrine that are not essential, listen and try to learn why they see things as they do. You can agree to respectfully disagree.

¹⁷ They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. Galatians 4:17 The Judaizers are boasting of their converts among the Gentiles, but only for their pride's sake. Like the Pharisees, what they do is done to be seen by others and held in honor. At the same time, they are the biggest hypocrites (Luke 12:1^{xxxiv}).

¹⁸ It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, Galatians 4:18 Paul may be referring to His labor for them and their importance to him whether he is present or away from them (Philippians 1:27^{xxxv}). He makes much of their value to God and His kingdom.

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. Galatians 4:19,20 Paul had such a passion for the converts to grow in Christ likeness. This comes from a genuine love for the flock and desire to see the kingdom advance. A mature Christian will exhibit the life of Christ which is the fruits of the Spirit, and that draws others into the family of God. Oswald Chambers refers to it as making our hearts a Bethlehem. He writes, *God's trust is that He gives me Himself as a babe. God expects my personal life to be a 'Bethlehem.'* Am I allowing my natural life to be slowly transfigured by the indwelling life of the Son of God? *God's ultimate purpose is that His Son might be manifested in my mortal flesh.* My Utmost August 9

What a contrast with the agitators! Paul was willing to suffer for the Galatians and labor for them in prayer. The agitators just wanted to use them to exalt themselves. This is a revealing contrast that we can see today. The goal of a faithful minister is to see the life of Jesus increase in each congregant, to see the Son manifest in our mortal flesh.

Paul felt like he was starting all over again with them, for this was something he had faced as a new Christian. He wanted to be there and see that they accepted the truth of this message and end the concern that he presently had. He can't understand how they would go from faith and grace to works of the law as he was so sure they had been born-again. But we do this all the time when we substitute ritual for relationship. That is because we let our old nature get back on the throne of our hearts. We find a comfortable place and don't want to change. But **if you are truly born again, the most uncomfortable place for you is a comfortable place.** We should always be experiencing growing pains as we crucify the old nature and let the life of Christ be manifested in us.

Questions

- 1 What were you enslaved by?
- 2 Why are we tempted to turn from God to rituals?
- 3 What was Paul's fear?
- 4 What brings sorrow to your teachers? Joy?
- 5 What was it Paul wanted them to see in him?
- 6 How did Paul express the love the Galatians had for him?
- 7 What risks did they accept listening to Paul's message?
- 8 How should we receive correction?
- 9 How can you spot genuine shepherds?
- 10 Why do we settle for ritual?

ⁱ **John 8:34 (ESV)**

³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.

ⁱⁱ **Acts 17:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

ⁱⁱⁱ **1 John 4:19** We love because he first loved us.

^{iv} **John 8:31-32 (ESV)**

³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples,

³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

^v **Matthew 11:28-30 (ESV)**

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

^{vi} **Colossians 3:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.

^{vii} **2 Peter 1:8 (ESV)**

⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

^{viii} **John 17:3 (ESV)**

³ And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

^{ix} **Isaiah 49:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.

^x **Hebrews 7:25 (ESV)**

²⁵ Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

^{xi} **Ephesians 1:4 (ESV)**

⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

In love

^{xii} **Psalms 17:8 (ESV)**

⁸ Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings,

^{xiii} **Revelation 20:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

^{xiv} **Luke 12:32 (ESV)**

³² "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

^{xv} - Todd Wilson, Preaching the Word - Galatians: Gospel-Rooted Living.

^{xvi} **Hebrews 4:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

^{xvii} **John 15:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

^{xviii} **1 Peter 2:2 (ESV)**

² Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—

^{xix} **Hebrews 13:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

^{xx} **John 15:13 (ESV)**

¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

^{xxi} **Matthew 25:23 (ESV)**

²³ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’

^{xxii} **1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 (ESV)**

¹⁹ For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?

²⁰ For you are our glory and joy.

^{xxiii} **1 Corinthians 10:33 (ESV)**

³³ just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

^{xxiv} **Isaiah 40:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

^{xxv} **Galatians 2:20 (ESV)**

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

^{xxvi} **John 17:21 (ESV)**

²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

^{xxvii} **Hebrews 10:32-33 (ESV)**

³² But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

^{xxviii} **Galatians 4:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.

^{xxix} **Acts 15:1 (ESV)**

¹ But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

^{xxx} **Romans 16:17-18 (ESV)**

¹⁷ I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.

¹⁸ For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.

^{xxxi} **2 Corinthians 12:7-9 (ESV)**

⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

^{xxxii} **2 Timothy 2:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

^{xxxiii} **Proverbs 27:6 (ESV)**

⁶ Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

^{xxxiv} **Luke 12:1 (ESV)**

¹ In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, he began to say to his disciples first, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

^{xxxv} **Philippians 1:27 (ESV)**

²⁷ Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,