

## **Introduction**

Recently I was up close and personal with grandchildren who were sick with a stomach virus. There is little more revolting than what is expelled from a nauseous stomach. At one point the sight, smell, and sound caused me to heave as well. So revolting is it that is unthinkable anyone or anything would go back to what it coughed up. But that is exactly the image Peter used of those who turned back from the gospel. He writes, "What the true proverb says has happened to them: 'the dog returns to its own vomit.'" This image depicts exactly what Paul feared might be happening among the Galatians who had professed to believe in Christ alone. So in our text this morning, he is pleading with them to not turn back again to where they had come from.

[Read text and Pray]

Three weeks ago we publicly set apart our brother Joel Ebert to the gospel ministry and I preached a message on the burden of gospel ministry. As we looked at Galatians 4:17-19, we considered Paul's longing for the Galatians as the deep desire to be born by every minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Focusing on the people God has entrusted to us, we labor earnestly to present every person complete in Christ Jesus. We want to see Christ formed in them. Influenced by false teachers, the path the Galatians were considering would lead them astray from the goal. The false gospel they were hearing would take them far from being like Christ. In fact it would take them back to the sort of condition in which they lived before Paul came and preached to them. And so in these verses, he has three exhortations by which to call out to the Galatians and urge them not to go back. Likewise, we need to be an influence upon one another to keep each other from going back to the enslavement of a works gospel.

Exhortation number one:

### **I. Embrace Freedom.**

This exhortation comes across in verses 8-11. Paul had come on a missionary journey to cities and towns in the region known as Galatia. The people who lived there were mostly pagan Gentiles. But there were some Jews, and there were also Gentiles who worshiped with the Jews. For the most part the Jews totally rejected Paul's gospel. It was the Gentiles who responded favorably and were formed into New Testament churches. They had been worshipers of so-called gods, but of course there is no God but one. They were demonically enslaved. They were involved in religious practices by which they hoped to receive some divine favor, but it was all for naught. Whatever their idea of salvation, it was a works-based system. As Paul says to them, "You did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods."

What a contrast when they came to know God through Paul's gospel preaching. They were introduced to the one true God. They were informed of Jesus Christ the son of God who according to the flesh descended from Israel's King David. The Apostle preached that Jesus is the Savior. The Jews rejected him, and Pilate executed him though he found in him no guilt worthy of death. He was taken down from the tree of execution and laid in a tomb, but God raised him to life. Paul's message was that forgiveness of sins was provided through Jesus for those who would believe. One of the lines of his preaching is found in Acts 13:39: "by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses."

Through faith these individuals came to know God, or rather, says Paul, they came to be known by God. This is the accurate expression of what happens in conversion. It is not so much that you come to know God as it is that you come to be known by God. It is not that God becomes aware of you, but God loves you in a special, extraordinary way—the way of salvation. It is in contrast to the warning Jesus gave at the conclusion of the Sermon in the Mount. There Jesus warned it is not the people who claim to know God who are saved but the people who are known by God. And those are the people who do God's will.

But here is the point of Paul. When you come to know God through faith in Christ Jesus, you are free from enslavement—whether the enslavement of worshiping false gods or the enslavement of trying to keep the law of God or the supposed law of some imagined god. To come to know God or rather to be known by God in Jesus Christ is to be set free from slavery.

If anyone has been set free from slavery, could you imagine them going back? Can you imagine them wanting to again bear the chains of servitude? No, of course not. One would be out of his mind to desire to exchange freedom for enslavement. That is why Paul asks, "How can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?" They had reverted to a system based on the belief that a sinner could somehow satisfy God through his own efforts at keeping the law. For this reason, Paul expresses out loud that his labor over the Galatians may have been a waste.

So, in effect, Paul is saying to the Galatians to "embrace freedom." In Christ we are free from the law. We are free from its penalty. We are free from its tyranny. We are from it. This matter is a real issue even today. Some Christians want to go back to observing Passover and such. They seem to look down on those Christians who won't join in with them. We should certainly be able to learn from those Old Testament observances; they are shadows of Christ and his work. But any idea that it is super-spiritual to celebrate them moves toward the embrace of enslavement once again. And to require it for a right relationship with God, as the Judaizers were doing, in effect kicks Christ back out of the equation and removes its adherents from any gospel hope. The resulting gospel is no gospel at all.

So, as those who have come to be known by God, who have tasted freedom, don't go back. Justification is by faith alone in the work of Christ alone.

Exhortation number two:

## **II. Embrace My Example.**

This exhortation is the centerpiece of the substance of verse 12. "Brothers," Paul pleads, "I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are."

This exhortation, in the form of a command, is the first such command of Paul in the letter. It comes with warmth and comradery. Be like me for I am like you, brothers. What Paul is highlighting is the fact that when Paul came to them, he came as one who is free from the law. To go to his letter to the Philippians, we recall Paul's manner of life before he came to be known by God. If anyone ever thought he had reason for confidence in the flesh, it was Paul. He was circumcised on the eighth day. As to the law he was a Pharisee. And as to righteousness under the law, he was blameless. Nevertheless, he was in bondage. He was enslaved. His law-keeping was no better than filthy rags. His righteousness could not compare to that of Christ Jesus. So he threw it all away. He counted it rubbish for a righteousness not of his own from the law but that which comes through faith in Christ. This is true righteousness and to embrace this righteousness is to embrace freedom. And this was

Paul's example. When he came to the Galatians, he came as one who in one sense was like the Galatians. As they were not under the mosaic law, neither was he. He had renounced a righteousness of the law. He had renounced law-keeping. Now they are embracing law-keeping and he is saying to them, "be like me because I am like you were."

Be like me! Be free from the law! An important application from this particular point is the winsomeness with which Paul exhorts his audience. He is perplexed about the Galatians. He wonders who has bewitched them. But still he calls them "brothers" and he has not given up on them even though there is significant cause for concern.

Let me illustrate by referencing a recent explosion within the conservative evangelical world. Shockwaves have been felt because of some statements made recently by Alistair Begg. These comments were made in an interview conducted back in the fall, but for some reason folks are just now becoming aware of them. They arose as a word of advice Begg gave to a grandmother whose grandchild was to enter into marriage with a "transgender" person. He advised that she should go to the wedding and buy the couple a gift so as not to give the impression of judgmentalism.

Now, those of you who have been around know we had to face this very issue in this church several years back. So I hope you know I am extremely saddened and disappointed by this advice. It is bad advice. It is unbiblical advice. Begg contradicted himself by his answer. He asked the grandmother did her grandchild know of her faith in Christ? And did the grandchild know that she could not countenance such an arrangement? And then he encouraged her to countenance the arrangement by attending the ceremony and giving a gift. I am perplexed at Alistair. I am wondering who has bewitched him. But I am not yet ready to renounce him altogether. A number of vocal brothers have issued public calls for Begg to reconsider and recant. I am hopeful that he will. He is a brother about whom I am concerned, but a brother for whom I will pray for clarity and humility and repentance. Yet I should demonstrate that same humility.

We all should be gentle and kind-hearted when it comes to confrontation. We all need to be testing our own motives and methods and manners as we consider the wrongs we each have done. We should not approach the front door of our sinning neighbor with a raised sledge hammer. That's more like Jesus will be when he returns. In Revelation 19 Jesus is depicted on a white horse judging and waging war. His eyes are a flame of fire. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to smite the nations and rule them with a rod of iron. We are not quite there yet. And we should be careful about rendering final judgment before the time. We should consider lovingly and with a measure of forbearance our struggling brothers and sisters. We must not compromise, but we must not be belligerent either. As Paul so eloquently says to the Ephesians, "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (4:15-16).

Another thing that Paul does here in this verse is he reminds us that we should be able to encourage brothers and sisters in Christ to be like us. Now, that is not to say that any of us is perfect or that we recommend that others should be just like us in every way. We all have blind spots and areas of weakness. However, if we belong to Christ then there should be some changes ongoing in us. And in some cases we should be able to encourage others by pointing to what Christ has done in us. We should all be a godly influence on others. We should all be able to point others to some aspects of

our lives in which we can with all humility say "Be like me in this area." Is your life exerting an influence for godliness in the lives of others?

Exhortation number three:

### **III. Embrace Me.**

This exhortation comes across indirectly through Paul's reminder to the Galatians of how they received him at first and how now it seems that the tables have turned. He asks them what has become of the blessing that they felt when Paul first came to them. Has he now become their enemy? All of this content is, in effect, an appeal that they would turn back to Paul and embrace him once again with the joy and selflessness and enthusiasm with which they first embraced him.

And how was that first reception? Paul says at that time ... "you did me no wrong." Paul had an undisclosed ailment which was apparently off-putting. It was a trial to them, but that did not stand in the way. The Galatians were not put off. No. They did not scorn or despise him but received him as an angel of God, even as they would have Christ Jesus himself. In fact they were willing to sacrifice their very selves for Paul's well-being. This seems to be the import of the fact that they would have even gone to such lengths as to have gouged out their own eyes and given them to Paul if that would have provided the help he needed. That is how warmly Paul had been embraced when he first came to Galatia.

But now it has all changed. What became of the blessing they felt? What happened to the warm welcome and the joy they knew of learning that God had provided eternal life for them even as Gentiles? In Acts 13 Luke describes the exuberance of the Gentiles who received the word of Paul that they were "rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord." Now Paul wonders, "What has become of the blessing you felt?" Now Paul feels as if he who was so fervently welcomed in the past has now become their opponent. Unlike the false teachers he was not making much of them to curry their favor. He was making much of them because they truly are precious to him. All he wanted was to impart truth to them. They are like his own children. And his overarching goal for them is that they would take on the character of Christ. Paul still holds the Galatians close to his heart and his unspoken summons is that they would embrace him back. Would they just realize the error of their way and return to the way they received him at the first?

Two matters of significance stand out to me in Paul's appeal for the Galatians to re-embrace Paul. One is LOVE. Paul's argument for the Galatians to embrace him is based on the affection and warmth they once had together. It speaks of the union of love with which believers in Christ are bound together. We do not merely believe the same things. We are family with one another in Christ. We are brothers and sisters. The cords that bind Christians together are far stronger than the sharing of a common bloodline or a last name or a group of ancestors. The warmth with which the Galatians received Paul when he first came is the warmth that should characterize us day-in and day-out. We must be others-oriented. It is our calling and it should be natural. Do you love the brethren? Are you ready to gouge out your eyes for them if necessary? You will not quickly allow them to become your opponent. We must see and embrace the beauty of what it means to love each other with the love that is from Christ. What are you doing to serve the body? What are you giving of yourself to benefit your brothers and sisters in the body? Don't keep to yourself! As you and I share the love, it multiplies.

Then the second matter that stands out to me on this point is TRUTH. It is a staggering question that Paul puts to the Galatians: "Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?" This world demands affirmation no matter what. If you don't affirm me and my choices then you are a

bigot; you are my enemy. Use my pronouns or you are not showing me respect. Truth is irrelevant and hostile to the mindset of this age. All that is relevant is what I feel and what I declare. It is a crazy and mixed-up age, this age in which we live. One day the truth is going to smack it in the face with a sledge hammer because it has resisted the truth for so, so long.

I say not that we should smack the world in the face with a sledge hammer. But we must not withhold the truth. We must speak the truth in love. To affirm the lies of this age is not loving. Neither is judgmentalism. But neither is withholding the truth. Give people the truth. Jesus said that it is the truth that will set you free. As long as people live in the lies, they are enslaved. They are in bondage. Love gives people the truth even if they don't like it, don't believe it, or just don't want it. We do not have to shove it down their throats, but we just need to keep dishing it out—one truth at a time. Always the truth and always in love. If they choose to reject it, it is on them. If we choose not to speak it, that is on us. The gospel truths are the ones we are most clearly bound to share.

Speaking the truth is worth the risk. If we speak the truth as Paul was doing to the Galatians, we risk that they might turn on us. We risk that the relationships we once had might turn from warmth and affection to opposition and enmity. However, it is worth the risk. What if God uses the truth we speak to turn wanderers back to the way? The greatest catastrophe is not that they reject our appeals. The greatest catastrophe is that they remain in their posture of rejection because we do not speak the truth to them in love.

Sometimes the relationships we form within the body are painful. It is painful when one we've known as a brother or a sister wanders, turns away, or outright rejects the truth. It hurts. You can certainly feel the hurt that Paul feels as he yearns over the Galatians. To love carries with it the willingness to be hurt. But true love is willing to hurt because if it is love it is willing to sacrifice. And if it is love it will be patient. Unwaveringly, love will hold forth the truth in the hope that the wanderer will repent and come home. How are you demonstrating a willingness to hurt in your love for other followers of Christ? Are you persisting with those you love even when they hurt you?

Paul's example speaks to the situation Alistair Begg addressed. It shows us that we should offer vastly different counsel to that grandmother whose grandchild was entering an unbiblical union. No, ma'am, I would say, you should NOT go to that ceremony. Does your grandchild know that you are an unflinching follower of Christ? Do they realize that you cannot countenance such a thing? Then keep that grandchild aware of these things. Explain to them this is why you will NOT be attending the ceremony. This is why you will NOT be giving them a gift. You love them too much to rejoice with them in unrighteousness. Say to them, "My love for you runs so deep and my love for Jesus runs even deeper. Therefore, for me to countenance this ceremony and this relationship would be for me to deny Christ and it would be to help you along on your journey to hell. It would be the most unloving thing I could do. If you are hungry, I will feed you. If you are thirsty I will give you drink. I will not disown you as my grandchild; I will treat you with the kindness my heart longs to pour out. However, more than anything I value your eternal soul. I long for you to be in heaven with Jesus. But as long as you are involved in this relationship, that cannot happen."

Proverbs 27:6 says: Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

"If I came to your ceremony it would be like the kisses of an enemy. I would be merely attempting not to fall out of favor with you; it would be hostility cloaked as a kiss. My decision not to attend your ceremony may wound you. I don't relish your being wounded, but I hope the wound brings

you to the point that you see yourself as a sinner and that you repent. So I will not attend this wedding. I love Jesus and I love you too much to do otherwise.”

Brothers and sisters, value those who will speak truth to you. It is a true friend who is willing to tell you the truth even at great risk. Do not allow those who speak truth into your life to become your enemies. How greatly blessed you are if you have true friends who will lovingly tell you the truth.

### **Conclusion**

Our love for Christ and for people in the world should lead us to boldly and kindly preach the truth of the gospel to them like Paul did when he first went to Galatia. And our love for Christ and for people in the church should lead us to keep speaking the truth with kindness and care to one another in love. Let us resolve to risk whatever we must to truly love one another during the easy times as well as those times when we have to be calling out to each other not to go back where we came from.