*In the magazine called the “U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings”, Frank Koch tells this story. Two battleships assigned to the training squadron had been at sea on maneuvers in heavy weather for several days. I was serving on the lead battleship and was on watch on the bridge as night fell. The visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the captain remained on the bridge keeping an eye on all activities. Shortly after dark, the lookout reported, “Light, bearing on the starboard bow.” “Is it steady or moving astern?” the captain asked. The lookout replied, “Steady, Captain,” which meant we were on a dangerous collision course with that ship. The captain then called the signalman, “Signal that ship: ‘We are on a collision course, advise you change course twenty degrees.’” Back came the signal, “Advisable for you to change course twenty degrees.” The captain said to the signalman, “Send: ‘I’m a captain, change course twenty degrees.’” “I’m a seaman” came the reply. “You had better change course twenty degrees.” By that time the captain was furious. He spat out to the signalman, “Send: ‘I’m a battleship. Change course twenty degrees.’” Then back came the signal, “I’m, a lighthouse.” We changed course.*

That captain swallowed his pride and did the right thing by changing course before disaster struck. Have you ever tried to stop someone you loved from doing something stupid? You clearly saw where that person was headed with their choices and you knew the outcome wasn’t going to be good. You knew they were about to make a terrible mistake – a mistake that could have dire consequences if they proceeded down that road. And you loved them – you loved them too much to let them crash, so you pleaded with them. You reasoned with them. Maybe you even explained that you had been on that same terrible road as well, “*you’d been there – done that*”, and it did not go well – but no matter how hard you tried, those you loved just didn’t get it and refused to heed your advice. You just couldn’t help them. Have you been there before? I think most parents have at one time or another and can relate to the frustration and the sorrow that is experienced in these types of difficult situations.

If you can relate, then you have a pretty good idea of how Paul felt. Paul loved the Galatians and they had loved him. They were his spiritual children, so to speak – he had shared the gospel to them, and they received it gladly, and they were off to a great start. But Paul continued on his missionary journey, and in his absence, some false teachers – wolves in sheep’s clothing, crept in and deceived the Galatians, leading them to make some terrible choices – abandoning the gospel of grace by faith and instead foolishly seeking God’s approval by keeping the rules and rituals of the Law. These false teachers had deceived the Galatians into thinking that they had to do more for God or He would not accept them. Paul had tried to help them see the error in their ways. Paul reasoned with them using Scripture like a theologian. Paul argued with them like a lawyer in court. He had given them a history lesson and examples and illustrations to try to educate them like a teacher – Paul had thrown everything at them but the kitchen sink, but to no avail – and now his heart is broken over his wayward children, so he shares how he feels about them, which brings us to **Galatians** **4 verses 12-20**.

**12I beg of you, brethren, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong; 13but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; 14and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself. 15Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. 16So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth? 17They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them. 18But it is good always to be eagerly sought in a commendable manner, and not only when I am present with you. 19My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you— 20but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.**

Based on our previous messages in Galatians, do you hear a difference in Paul’s tone? It seems that Paul moves from their head with all of his logic and reasoning – to their hearts, as he makes this personal plea to them. This is called by some the “heart of the letter” because Paul bears his broken heart to the Galatians, as a mother in agony might do, watching her children stray off course.

During Paul’s initial visit to Galatia, Paul had been received very warmly by the people there, and in **verse 12**, Paul reminds them that they had a real genuine connection because he was just like them. Paul had become like a Gentile by rejecting legalism as the way to a right standing with God. Paul reminds them that that he too was once under the Law, but now he is free from the condemnation, and the custody, and the control of it because he came to understand the God-given truth that salvation is only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

You know, if you want an example of the power of God in a person’s life, just think about how far Paul has come. Paul was a very zealous and devoted Jew who was more than willing to crush anyone who named the name of Jesus Christ. Paul was a strict legalist, he had all the advantages that Judaism had to offer, but after coming to Christ, everything which had defined him was now considered rubbish. So, Paul has become, in effect, like a Gentile, free from all of it, and he’s telling the Galatians, *“Don’t you go back into what I had been delivered from. I’ve been there – done that, so please don’t you make the same mistake!”*

Isn’t it ironic? Paul, a Jew, became like a Gentile – while the Galatians, who are Gentiles, want to become like Jews. It’s all twisted isn’t it?

Paul challenged the Galatians to become like him by rejecting legalism and remembering the true gospel of grace they had heard and received from him. Paul is trying to encourage them to walk in the freedom that he is walking in, to quit staring into that mirror of the Law that is not loving or merciful or forgiving and continually reminds them just how filthy they are. They are believers, the Law has already done its job in their lives, and now they can live by grace through faith in Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Paul continues in **verse 12** and tells them they had done him no wrong – instead, just the opposite, they had openly and lovingly received him when they first met and now, Paul is wondering – How could you reject me now after being so accepting of me back then? Then Paul gives an example to remind them just how generous and affectionate they were towards him in the past.

In **verses 13-14**, Paul says, **“but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself.”**

This is an interesting passage. Apparently, on his first missionary journey, Paul had not intended to visit this region of Galatia, it was not part of his original plan. It was not a stop on his travel itinerary, but Paul was forced to do so because of some bodily illness. He was there because he got sick and needed care.

Now, there is a lot of speculation as to what Paul was dealing with medically, but no one really knows, but whatever it was, it must have made Paul somewhat repulsive in his appearance, because he praised the Galatians for the way they treated him in spite of the way he looked – and apparently, he looked terrible.

Those two words “**despise**” and “**loathe**” suggest that Paul was a sickening sight. “Despised” means to regard with utter contempt or at least to disregard. “Loathed” is the rendering of a graphic term which literally means to “spit out.” *If you have ever swallowed a bug – you have had a small “taste” of the meaning of this word.* In the ancient Near East, people would spit after coming in contact with a disease or an illness that was repulsive, apparently thinking that there was some therapeutic value in this act. The act of spitting was often associated with that which was repulsive. So, Paul’s point is clear – he was a hot mess to look at.

Also remember, some would have suggested that Paul’s illness indicated that he had a much bigger problem – a problem with God. What I am talking about here?

Just like Job’s friends – just like that cause and effect mentality I mentioned last week, some of the legalists could have suggested that Paul was under God’s divine judgment – he was being punished with this terrible illness for his theology – his gospel of grace, and consequently they should reject him as an apostle and reject his gospel message – but the Galatians didn’t. Surprisingly, they embraced Paul – and if they were anything like us, I suspect it was the Galatian mothers who swarmed all over Paul like honey bees and nursed him back to health, at least to some degree. So, they had a great start together, but now they are rejecting Paul and more importantly, they are rejecting God’s grace.

Now before we move on, I want to take us down a little rabbit trail because there is an observation I want to make here.

Paul was terribly sick, he was revolting in appearance due to his affliction, whatever that was – and, Paul was absolutely in the center of God’s will. Paul was loved by God, he was doing exactly what God wanted him to do, he was “God’s guy” in the early church to spread the gospel to the Gentiles – and still – he suffered greatly from this affliction. Think about that. It doesn’t seem right – it doesn’t seem fair, does it?

But consider this – because of his affliction, Paul had to make an unplanned stop and stay awhile in the region of Galatia, and while he was there, he got an opportunity to preach the gospel to the Galatians. If Paul had not been ill, I guess it is fair to say that the Galatians would not have heard the gospel during his first missionary journey.

Do you see God’s providence in action here? I bring this up because it is very applicable to you and me. Maybe your affliction, maybe your suffering, maybe the hardships you experience have very little to do with you. Think about that. Maybe there’s something bigger going on, maybe there’s something greater hanging in the balance, and that even speaks to our current situation. God is doing something in our world. It’s part of His sovereign plan, even though, it’s really hard. Do I know what He’s up to? Nope, but I do know this: I know God is at work in our lives – He’s always at work. I know He has a purpose for all of this. I know He’s going to use it. I know it is for our greater good and for His glory, and I know we can trust Him. God has this grand plan, and you and I are somehow, someway, woven in this plan even though it is hard and might even seem unfair. But there is something greater at stake that God is doing in our midst. We need to trust Him.

Let’s move on to **verses 15** and **16**.

**15Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. 16So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?**

Paul wants to know – where’s that loving feeling they once had. At one time they loved him so much that they would have torn out their eyes and given them to him. Paul may have had eye problems, and obviously he was exaggerating here, but the point is the Galatians loved Paul with a love that would have caused them to make any sacrifice on his behalf.

So, in light of their great love for him, Paul asks “*What happened?*” “*Why the change?*” “*My feelings for you haven’t changed a bit. Why have your feelings for me changed? Have you changed simply because I told you the truth?*” *“Am I now your enemy because I told you something you didn’t want to hear?*” Apparently, the answer was “*yes*.”

Everything had changed. The Judaizers had convinced the Galatians that Paul was not a legitimate apostle and that his gospel, by excluding the requirements and rituals of the Law, was watered down. The Judaizers had come in and stolen their affection and love for Paul. The Galatians were treating Paul like the enemy because he preached to them the truth of God’s grace. Previously, he was their friend for telling them the truth, but now he is apparently their enemy – for telling them the truth.

**Proverbs 27:6** says, ***“Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.”***

Paul had proved his love for the Galatians by telling them the truth; but they would not accept it. They were enjoying the “kisses” of flattery from the Judaizers, not realizing that these kisses were leading them into the bondage and sorrow of legalism. Christ had made them adult sons and heirs, but they were rapidly becoming slaves under the guardianship of the Law.

So, this controversy over legalism has separated Paul from his close friends, and now Paul reveals the true colors of the Judaizers who were leading them astray.

**17They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them. 18But it is good always to be eagerly sought in a commendable manner, and not only when I am present with you.**

This is where Paul’s knowledge and experience as a former Pharisee really comes in handy, because Paul knows that these Judaizers – just like the Jewish religious leaders he once knew, did not care about these people. It was just a ruse. Instead, what they really cared about was power, and possessions, and prestige. How many times did Jesus point that out in His day? How many times did Jesus confront the religious leaders for not caring about the people they were supposed to shepherd? The real reason – the true motivation of these Judaizers was not to promote Christ and His message, it was not to love and care for others – instead they sought to promote themselves and their own self-serving agendas. The Judaizers wanted to increase their fan base of converts and the Galatians were nothing more than a notch on the belt of these self-absorbed people. They wanted the praise of men, they wanted the attention to stroke their egos, and they wanted to feed their pride.

So, the Judaizers acted as if they really cared and they turned the affections and the interests of the Galatians away from Paul and to themselves. But that’s not all. Paul says they **shut them out**. In other words, the Judaizers isolated the Galatians from anyone who did not agree with them, and even today, this is a very common tactic used by cults.

*Trish and I used to watch a series on TV about escaping the cult of Scientology. The names have changed, the times have changed, but the tactics are exactly the same – demand exclusive allegiance to the religious person or to the religious group and require complete isolation from anyone who does not support or agree with them. This is what the cults do today, and this is what the Judaizers were doing to the Galatians.*

Paul warned the Galatians that the Judaizers were not who they claimed to be. They might declare allegiance to Jesus Christ. They might claim to represent the church in Jerusalem. They may be zealous and passionate and affectionate and personable – they may flatter you, but all this was just a ruse. Their ministry was not motivated by humble service to the Lord, but by their own selfish ambition and pride. They wanted to people to follow them.

Warren Wiersbe says, *“One of the marks of a false teacher is that he tries to attract other men’s converts to himself, and not simply to the truth of the Word or to the person of Jesus Christ. It was not the Judaizers who originally came to Galatia and led them to Christ; it was Paul. Like the cultists today, these false teachers were not winning lost sinners to Christ, but were stealing converts from those who were truly serving the Lord. The task of the spiritual leader is to get people to love and follow Christ, not to promote himself and his ministry.”*

Amen to that! So, behind what appeared to be an affection and devotion for the Galatians was this selfish prideful ambition of the Judaizers.

**19My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you— 20but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.**

I guess these last two verses are our connection to Mother’s Day, because Paul is speaking like a mom to her wayward children. As a matter of fact, Paul says he is in labor with them again.

I don’t know what it is like to be in labor – and thank you Jesus for that. During the birth of our son, the nurse had to sit me down in a Lazy Boy recliner in the birthing room, turn me away from all of the craziness, turn on the T.V., and give me something to drink. Just being in the same room was way too much for me to handle, so I’m not really feeling what Paul is saying here – but what is he saying?

Paul had this motherly affection for them, he’s burdened over them, and he’s agonizing like a mom in painful labor as he watches those he dearly loves and cares for stray off course. They are believers, Paul calls them his children, he has seen Christ working in their lives, and his only desire is that Christ would be **formed** in them. He wanted them to be living like Jesus, conformed to the image of Christ under the power of the Holy Spirit. They started off right – salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and Paul wants them to continue towards maturity – living by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Now in **verse 20**, it seems that Paul recognized that he was coming on a little too strong. He knew it, but he is very passionate about the Galatians and he doesn’t want to see them get hurt. He wishes he could be there in person so he could fully express his love and care for them.

I want to summarize a few things with you from this passage before I close.

Whenever people depart from the truth, there is going to be division and strained or even severed relationships. We want to be gracious and patient and loving to those who do not agree with us, but at the same time we must hold firm to the truth of God’s Word. And even though Paul is defending the truth, we also see that he understands that real people are involved, and if people are going to be pulled back to the truth, it may not start by winning an argument, or making your point, but instead by rekindling the relationship.

Last Wednesday, in our Bible Study, we talked about how natural legalism seems to us. It feels so right in many respects, and it’s so easy to adopt the mindset that tells you “*I must accomplish this in order to prove myself to God*.” “*I must do that so God will accept me.*” *“I have failed God one too many times, how could He ever love me?* It’s so easy to fall into that legalistic trap, even for believers – the same trap the Galatians walked into. They were deceived. They believed a lie. But what is the truth? The truth is Jesus has already done it all on your behalf. He accomplished what you could not accomplish. Christ did for you what you could not do for yourself. In Christ, you are already accepted and approved by God – that’s grace. Now we simply have to learn to walk in that knowledge – walking by grace through faith, living our lives surrendered to the One who loves us. That is Paul’s message to the Galatians, and it’s the gospel truth!

And lastly, Paul was not about to give up on the Galatians. We should not give up on people either. Keep praying. Keep sharing.

Source Material:

Holman New Testament Commentary – Max Anders

Bible Study Commentary, Galatians – Curtis Vaughan

The New Application Commentary, Galatians – Scot McKnight

Exposition Commentary – Warren Wiersbe

The Bible Knowledge Commentary – Walvoord & Zuck

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Classic Christianity – Bob George

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