

"I Am Perplexed About You"

Galatians 4:8-20

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This morning I want to drop you in the middle of Paul's epistle to the Galatians. Galatians 4, and this morning I hope to cover verses 8-20.

This is the transitional moment in Paul's letter to the Galatians. He is about to shift gears from doctrine to practical application. The apostle Paul usually follows a similar pattern in his letters: he first *expounds* doctrine; then he *applies* it. I've showed you this before so I won't belabor it now. But that is how Galatians is laid out. Chapters 5-6 are practical material based on the doctrinal foundation of the first four chapters.

The practical section starts at the beginning of chapter 5. But here in the passage we're looking at today, we have an extended section that is neither doctrinal instruction nor practical application.

It's an extended appeal from the apostle Paul to the believers in the Galatian churches. It's full of passion; the apostle Paul is simply unburdening his heart to them, and he does it in a way that is remarkable. This gives us an excellent insight into the heart and the personal character of the apostle Paul, and it shows us how as a pastor he loved his people.

He moves briefly out of the didactic, apostolic mode and assumes a personal and pastoral tone in order to make a direct appeal to these people whom he loves. And it's obvious that he loves them. His emotions are all over this passage, and it's an amazing range of emotion that he displays.

The whole passage is filled with several different kinds of personal feelings. He is unburdening his heart to them, expressing *how he feels about them as people*. Here he is at the point in the epistle where he is finishing the doctrinal section. You might expect him to sum up everything he has said so far, but this is not a dispassionate analysis of all the doctrinal issues that are on the table. He is pouring out his soul to the Galatians.

And he is clearly upset. He is heartbroken about how quickly the Galatians had moved away from the simplicity of the gospel and got bogged down in a lot of confusion about the Old Testament ceremonial laws. He is deeply burdened for the Galatians. At this point, he is not even sure of their salvation.

So he just tells them plainly what he is feeling. He employs almost every imaginable tone and temperament in the appeal he makes to them. In the space of a few sentences, he moves in and out freely between expressions of concern, candor, exasperation, the pain of his own personal hurt,

heartbreak over their confusion, fatherly kindness, fatherly sternness, and every feeling in between. In just a few sentences, he covers the gamut of reproof, rebuke, exhortation, and instruction in righteousness.

Let me read the passage, and listen for the different ways he expresses his passion. This section is a little long, so stay with me. I'm reading verses 8-20 (

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.

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 the blessing you felt? 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.

There's a tone of heartbroken sadness there, and I hope it comes through.

But I want to point out something important about this section regarding the way Paul dealt with people under his pastoral care. This section is remarkable for its complete lack of any hint of heavy-handedness or authoritarianism. Even though Paul is clearly upset, and distressed in his mind, and prepared to use every resource at his disposal to persuade the Galatians to see the light, the one thing Paul does *not* do is wield his authority as a threat.

And that's really remarkable, because Paul spent a considerable amount of time and effort in the early part of

this epistle establishing and defending his apostleship. He even talked about how at one point he had withstood the apostle Peter to the face and rebuked him publicly.

We know the apostle Paul could be stern when he had to. In 2 Corinthians, for example, there are a few places where he threatened to come and deal with the problems in that church by the straightforward use of his authority.

But that was never his first response. He did not begin a confrontation like this with an apostolic smackdown. Here in this context, he doesn't even bring up anything like that as a possibility.

It's not that this section is devoid of any expression of Paul's apostolic authority. He deals with them as a father talking to his children. He scolds them. He rebukes them. And in verse 19, he refers to them as "**my little children**"—so all through this section we get a sense of his authority over them. But he doesn't use raw authority as a threat against them. Instead, he pleads with them and earnestly entreats them to get back on track spiritually and embrace the truth just because it is the truth. This whole section is an appeal, not a threat.

Not only that, but he also uses a variety of tones with them. It's clear on the one hand that he is exasperated with them. He is deeply and personally grieved by their flirtation with a different gospel and a different message than what had

originally heard from him. He is frustrated. Bitterly disappointed. I don't think it would be going too far to say that there's a true sense in which he was angry. And he is angry in one sense with the Galatians themselves. In fact, when he starts out this section you almost get the sense for a moment he's about to unleash his wrath in all its full fury on them.

But then, in the next breath, he just sounds discouraged and disappointed. He says he is afraid that the labor he invested in them might prove to be in vain. It's clear that he is feeling a deeply personal kind of pain because of their disloyalty to him, and he expresses that pain in such a poignant way that you might begin to wonder whether his own feelings are so personally hurt that he will have trouble ever getting over it. If he stopped at verse 11, you might wonder if he would ever think fondly of the Galatians again.

But then he speaks tenderly about how warmly they received him when he first came to their region with the gospel message, and he recounts the remarkable kindness they showed him. And it's such a tender reflection that all you can hear is his profound sadness. It's clear that Paul himself is sad. He suddenly sounds more melancholy than angry (verse 16): **"Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?"**

But *then* he thinks about the false teachers and how they are trying to woo the Galatians away from their loyalty to Paul and get them to embrace their own point of view and become proselytes and followers of this legalistic system, and all of a sudden a tone of indignation surfaces again (v. 17): **"They make much of you, but for no good purpose."**

And finally, this great apostle, spiritual father to the congregations in Galatia, compares himself to a *mother* giving birth (v. 19). It's vivid imagery, and it's perfect for the situation, because the comparison to birth pangs sums up everything Paul was feeling about the Galatians—intense, unimaginable pain; a profound love for them; a passionate desire for what was best for them, a willingness to suffer and sacrifice for them; and a sense of parenthood and personal responsibility to look out for their welfare—all while they were oblivious to the pain and labor he had endured for their benefit. They were just like a bunch of little kids.

And now the Galatians were toying with the idea of abandoning Paul and following after a bunch of false teachers who had nothing personal invested in them. These were the Judaizers, who in essence wanted to impose the demands of Old Testament ceremonial law on the church, because they could not abide the notion that uncircumcised Gentiles could be freely forgiven without first converting to Judaism and placing themselves under the law. These false

teachers, the Judaizers, had never done anything but confuse them. They had challenged the apostle Paul's doctrine. They had questioned his apostolic credentials. And they had undermined his authority and belittled him in every way they could.

In fact, as far as the people in the Galatian churches were concerned, all the Judaizers had done for them was try to bind a heavy burden of legalistic obligations on their backs. And yet, the Galatians were being seduced by the doctrine of these men. Their ingratitude and callous lack of loyalty to the apostle Paul was stunning, and it's no wonder he sounds discouraged and sick at heart as he writes this passage.

But you have to admire the apostle Paul's great skill as a writer, not to mention his competence as a pastor, his courage as a great contender for the faith, and his compassion as a spiritual father. This section is just thirteen verses long, and yet it runs the gamut of emotion and style. In that short space, Paul is able to express all his feelings, with total candor and with incredible power, in an amazing economy of words, without ever sounding cruel or overly harsh.

I see at least five distinct stages in this appeal to the Galatians. Each stage but one is only two verses long, but all five stages show us the range of emotion the apostle felt; they powerfully appeal to every vestige of conscience and

conviction the Galatians might have felt; and they expose the inhumanity and evil that lay behind the Judaizers' strategy—as these false teachers shrewdly and dishonestly tried to drive a wedge between the apostle Paul and several churches full of people who had come to Christ through his ministry.

Let's look in order at the five stages of Paul's appeal to the Galatians, and try to learn something of how he dealt with people and why he was so exercised about this particular threat to the gospel.

Stage number one, verses 8-9:

1. HE QUESTIONS THEM

He begins this lengthy personal appeal with a single question designed to provoke them to face the destructive spiritual implications if they decide to abandon the his apostolic leadership and follow the doctrine of the Judaizers instead.

Now here's just a little bit of context for you: In the first seven verses of Galatians 4, Paul is pointing out that Christianity offers university-level spiritual instruction compared to the day-care-center spiritual lessons of the Old Testament ceremonial law. That's the point he opens this chapter with.

The Judaizers had suggested to the Galatians that the apostle Paul taught them only the bare-bones basics of Spiritual truth and given them a stripped-down gospel message, because he didn't tell them about circumcision, and the dietary laws, and the elaborate system of feast-days and ceremonies prescribed in the Old Testament. They claimed to offer an advanced version of what Paul had taught.

But Paul says the truth is just the opposite, and the flow of redemptive history proves it. God gave the Mosaic law as a kind of guardianship to the nation of Israel in her state of spiritual infancy. The law was a chaperon designed to conduct the Israelites safely through a world of evil and deliver them to the arms of their Messiah and deliverer.

The law was not a deliverer. It was designed to condemn sin, to deter people from sinning, and to show the exceeding sinfulness of sin. It was also designed to eliminate every hope from the sinner that he could ever attain righteousness on his own.

The Pharisees' mistake was that they believed they could attain a true and sufficient righteousness of their own through the law. In Romans 10:3, Paul said this about them: **"Being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."**

The Judaizers were trying to import that very same error into the church. Under the guise of claiming to teach an advanced version of Christianity, they were teaching the Galatians that they could achieve a kind of righteousness on their own. Not only that, but by insisting that you had to be circumcised in order to be saved, they were essentially claiming that you *must* have some righteousness of your own to bring to the table, or else you could not be saved at all.

If the Galatians accepted the Judaizers' doctrine, it would not put them on a higher plane of advanced Christianity, it would be like demoting themselves to nursery school. That, again, is the point Paul makes in the first seven verses of Galatians 4.

Now he says, the full truth is even more grim than that. If they bought the Judaizers' doctrine, that would show that they were trusting something other than Christ for their salvation. What the Judaizers were peddling was a different gospel, with a whole different way of salvation. So their religion wasn't even authentic Christianity.

Paul has made that point several times, in several ways throughout this epistle (starting with verses 8-9 in chapter 1). He is carefully drawing as clear a line as possible between the true gospel and the religion of the Judaizers. And now he makes the point once more by telling the Galatians he is

concerned about whether they have really abandoned their paganism or not.

Look at verse 8: **"Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods."**

Remember, these were Gentiles out of totally pagan backgrounds. Most of them were from a highly Romanized culture, so their religion was essentially superstition based on mythology. The Romans had adapted ancient Greek myths, given the Greek Gods Roman names, and that was the dominant religion throughout the Roman empire.

The dominant Greek god was Zeus, of course. The Romans called him Jupiter. Dionysus (the god of wine) in the Greek pantheon was called Bacchus in the Roman system. Apollo had the same name in both languages. You had goddesses like Diana (the goddess of the hunt) who was worshiped at Ephesus. Her Greek name was Artemis. And there was this entire system, which you probably studied in high school, which had been carried over from ancient Greece and by the first century was deeply ingrained in the culture, but not taken too seriously by anyone.

In other words, there probably were not many people who *really* believed the fables that were told about the gods. But all the superstitions were carefully followed anyway, in much the same way that superstitious people today still think Friday the 13th is bad luck, and some people refuse to walk

under ladders. It was generally acknowledged that the gods weren't real.

By the way, Augustus Caesar, the emperor in power at the time of Jesus' birth, had declared himself a priest and tried to reform Roman religion. He originally wanted to do away with the superstitious approach and stress spiritual disciplines like prayer, ethical values, and contemplative piety. He wanted the Roman religion to be taken seriously.

But of course, the religion was false to begin with and corrupt to the core, and by the end of the first century, the Caesars themselves were being deified, and people were supposed to treat the Caesars as if they were gods, even though everyone knew they were just men—and some of them were pretty low-life men, too.

So when Paul says in verse 8, "**you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods**"—not only was that literally true, but the Galatians themselves very likely *knew* the beings they worshiped weren't really gods, even while they were still in bondage to paganism, before they ever heard the gospel.

Now, notice what Paul says (verse 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?**" He is suggesting that buying into the Judaizers' system would be no better than going back to paganism.

Both the Judaizers and the pagans taught systems of works-righteousness. Both of them made salvation dependent on something the sinner must do for himself. And therefore both paganism and the religion of the Judaizers were simply different ways of rejecting Christ, because they both taught that the work Christ has done on behalf of sinners isn't quite enough.

By the way, I would love to take time to expound on the way he changes the words ("**you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God**"). That stresses the fact that their salvation is God's work, and not something they do on their own by a free-will choice they made. This is yet another emphatic expression of Paul's conviction that God is sovereign in salvation. But time doesn't permit us to follow that line of thought any further this morning. We have too many verses to cover.

Notice the expression Paul uses to describe work-religion in verse 9: "**the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world.**" The New King James Version says, "**the weak and beggarly elements.**" It's the very same Greek term Paul uses in verse 3, where he says, "**when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.**" *Elementary principles*—the ABCs; kindergarten curriculum—"kids' stuff." That's the idea.

Now, I don't think Paul is suggesting that there is any kind of moral equivalence between paganism and authentic Old Testament Judaism. Authentic Old Testament Judaism, correctly understood, did not teach salvation by works, either. He made that point in chapter 3, by showing that Abraham was justified by faith, and that's the only way anyone ever could be saved. Abraham's *faith*, not the works prescribed by the Mosaic law, is what defined the soteriology of the Old Testament.

But he does say both systems are elementary: kindergarten-level spirituality. And if you want a system of works, Paul says, ultimately legalism based on Moses' law is no better than rank paganism. If you turn away from the gospel to works, you are just as lost under one system as you are under the other. If you're going to drop out of university to go back to nursery school, take your pick: paganism, or legalistic Judaism. It ultimately doesn't make a lot of difference.

So he raises that point in the form of a question (v. 9): **"How can you turn back again"** to a works-system that is tantamount to what you were doing as pagans? You want to go back to spiritual infancy? And there's a tone of disgust and maybe a bit of scorn in the question, I think. *"How could you do this? What are you thinking? Do you really want to act like a bunch of sniveling toddlers, who can't get past the*

ABCs?" He is clearly disturbed with them, so he questions them, the same way my dad used to question me when I did something stupid as a little kid. It makes you feel foolish and childish, and that was exactly Paul's point.

So he starts with the question. Then in verses 10-11, he moves into stage 2 of his plea:

2. HE REBUKES THEM

His tone seems to become more stern in verse 10. Notice that the question of verse 9 is rhetorical: "**how can you turn back again to the [ABCs]?**" (Not only that, he uses some pretty strong adjectives: "weak and beggarly elements"; "**weak and worthless elementary principles.**") He's not waiting for an answer. There is no rational answer. Paul *knows* he had made the gospel message perfectly clear for them. They had no valid excuse for turning away from the simplicity of the gospel to a complex system of works that was made by taking the ABCs of Old Testament ritual and overlaying them on Christianity.

But let's not be too hard on the Galatians. We all have a tendency to look for some "secret" way to attain sanctification and blessedness other than simple faith in Christ. The human heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.

Grace forces us to acknowledge how hell-bent and deceitful our own hearts are, and the human heart simply does not like that. So our own hearts will find ways to convince us that we're really not so bad after all. It will seek ways to gain approval for itself. And before you know it, we are all susceptible to the same kind of works-oriented religious attitudes that had sucked the Galatians into the vortex of the Judaizers' false doctrine.

That is, after all, what the entire Roman Catholic system is all about: works and ceremonies and an external show of righteousness—all stemming from the human heart's refusal to acknowledge its own poverty. And we *all* have the same tendency. It is something we constantly have to fight, no matter how well we think we understand the gospel.

The Galatians were drawn to the Judaizers' doctrine because it looked so much more complicated and therefore much more advanced and sophisticated than the simple message they had heard from Paul.

Plus, the Judaizers could point to Scripture in the Old Testament that seemed to justify circumcision, and the dietary restrictions, and all the feasts and ceremonies and holy days. After all, God Himself instituted these things for Israel.

That's exactly what had the Galatians all confused. Verse 10: **"You observe days and months and seasons and years!"**

Those were all rituals and feast-days with Old Testament significance, prescribed for Old Testament Israel.

Now remember, those were all either backward-looking symbols (such as passover, which commemorated the Exodus); or they were types and pictures that pointed to Christ. (This was true of the passover feast, also, because the deliverance of passover symbolized a greater deliverance that the Messiah would bring.)

All those symbols were completely unnecessary now because the substance is better than a shadow; the reality is superior to a symbol; and clear doctrine is better than types and pictures. In the words of Hebrews 10:1, **"the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities."** In Colossians 2:16-17, Paul wrote, **"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. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."**

To turn away from Christ in order to retreat to a shadowy symbol that merely pointed to him is an expression of unbelief. It would be like if I took a dark, blurry, silhouette-style black-and-white picture of the back of Darlene's head and made a shrine out of that picture, and talked to that picture and left gifts at the picture-shrine—but refused to acknowledge Darlene's presence or look at her

actual face when she was right there in the room with me. Do you think she would be honored by the respect I showed to a blurry picture of her? I don't think so. The picture is a symbol, and not even a particularly good one. If I turned away from her to devote my time to a bad picture of the outline of her shadow, that would be the same thing as rejecting her.

That's what the Galatians were in danger of doing by turning back to the outmoded ceremonies of Old Testament Jewish law. They should have understood known better. It is inconceivable that the apostle Paul omitted to teach them these things. But they were seduced by the lies anyway. Therefore Paul's rebuke is firm and very abrupt.

He gives them this scorching rebuke (verse 11): **"I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain."** *"I'm afraid I have been wasting my time ministering to you. If you are going to turn away from the gospel and go back to a system that is no better than rank paganism, nothing I have ever taught you will do you any good whatsoever."*

The clear implication is actually very frightening. He is fearful for them that they are going to end up in hell for having turned away from the gospel. The issue is that serious, and he doesn't shy away from saying so and making it as plain as possible. You have to give him credit for the clarity of his rebuke, but this would be a frightening letter to

receive from an apostle—especially an apostle whom you loved and whose ministry was so far-reaching. This must have brought them up short. It's practically a verbal slap in the face.

Now, there's nothing mean-spirited about it. Paul is simply relating his very real fear for them. He's being honest—for their sakes. Not to hurt them, but to waken them up to the very real danger. He's shouting the alarm as loudly and distinctly as possible, because the danger really is real.

This is where the apostle Paul's appeal takes an interesting turn. This is where *I* usually mess up in counseling or admonishing people. It's tempting at point like this to turn up the volume and camp on the point and find several more ways of being straightforward and scary and stern—because you know the point is being made and you finally are being heard.

So when you read verse 11, you're more or less braced for Paul to *really* unload on them in the next few verses.

But he doesn't do that. He does the exact opposite. He turns down the volume and suddenly takes a very tender tone with them. And he moves into the third phase of his appeal.

If you're following the outline, he starts by questioning them (vv. 8-9); then he rebukes them (vv 10-11). Now (vv. 12-16)—

3. HE PLEADS WITH THEM

Notice: this is the longest section of his whole appeal. Every other phase is exactly two verses long. It's interesting to see how strongly he makes a point in relatively few words and then moves on. This shows how masterful he was with language and rhetoric. This is a well-crafted appeal, and he never belabors a point.

But when he gets to the point of making a tender plea, he takes more than twice as long as he spends on any other aspect of his appeal.

Notice how abruptly the tone changes between verses 11 and 12. Just when you think he is going to drop the hammer on them, he dials it back, and he speaks to them in a very personal way: **"Brothers, I entreat you."**

He has just implied that perhaps they are *not* brothers at all but apostates-in-the-making. But then just as soon as he says that, he quickly makes it clear that he wants to give them the benefit of the doubt. **"Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are."**

That's a reference to the principle of 1 Corinthians 9:22 ("I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some")—especially verse 21: **"To those outside the law I became as one outside the law . . . that I might win those outside the law."** Then in verse 23, he adds, "I do it all for the sake of the gospel."

He had dispensed with the trappings of the law and Jewish culture for *their* sakes, to make sure the gospel was clear and unencumbered by any confusion about those things. Now he pleads with them to become like him—free from the trappings of religious ceremony.

Look at the end of Galatians 4:12: "**You did me no wrong,**" he says. Or, as the New King James Version has it, "**You have not injured me at all.**" What he means by that is slightly ambiguous. He *might* simply mean that he was not harmed spiritually at all by setting aside the ceremonial observances of the law for their sake. He didn't forfeit anything essential by laying those things aside. That's certainly true.

Or it could be that the sentence at the end of verse 12 actually introduces the string of memories he recites for them in verses 13-15. "**You did me no wrong,**" he says. "On the contrary, you have always been especially kind to me."

And he recites how they had received him when he first came to their region.

Unfortunately, we don't have time to explore all the interesting questions that come up in verses 13-15. Notice (v. 13) he says when he came to them, he was suffering from some physical infirmity. What was it? Bottom line is, he doesn't say. Some think it was malaria, because he would have traveled through a malaria-infested region to get there. I'm more inclined to think (based on clues here in this

context and elsewhere) that Paul had some kind of problem with his eyes. It may have affected his vision, and it may even have affected how he looked, because verse 14 seems to hint that it involved something that might have caused people to turn away from him or be repulsed by him. And he says in verse 15, **"I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me."**

In Acts 23, where the high priest slaps Paul and Paul insults him, one possible reason for that would be if Paul's eyesight was bad. And here in Galatians, at the very end of the epistle, (Galatians 6:11) when he signs his name to the parchment, he says, **"See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand."**

So I think he had a problem with his eyes, and it could be that this blindness first began to affect him severely about the time he first went to the region of Galatia. But the bottom line is, he doesn't say specifically what he is talking about. The Galatians knew, and that's what was important. They had burned into their memory the events surrounding Paul's first arrival, when he gave them the gospel, and they had showed him the utmost kindness in return.

So he knows their love for him, and he pleads with them on that basis. Then he poignantly asks them (v. 16): **"Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?"** Telling them the truth was the only thing he had ever done. That's

what they originally liked about him. Was that now going to be a reason for them to turn against him?

It's a powerful and effective argument coming on the heels of his rebuke, because this underscores the truth that the only possible motives he had for writing them such a rebuke were his love for them and his love for the truth.

The tenderness of this section doesn't diminish at all from the force of the earlier rebuke. In fact, it adds to the power of the rebuke much more than he would have added if he had simply turned up the volume and been more severe.

So follow the pattern here. If you're taking notes you should have three points so far. He questions them. Then he rebukes them. Then he pleads with them. Now, fourth (vv. 17-18):

4. HE WARNS THEM

His warning is about the shady motives of the Judaizers. They were just like the Pharisees whom Jesus rebuked in Matthew 23:15: **"You travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves."** That's what the Judaizers were trying to do with the Galatians. They had ulterior motives.

Verse 17: **"They make much of you, but for no good purpose."** The NIV gets the sense of it: **"Those people are**

zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them."

"Don't be flattered by the fact that these guys have taken such an interest in you," Paul says. They have no good motives. In fact, their doctrine would estrange you from us and shut you out of the kingdom—and their motive in teaching these things is just to make you into followers of them. It's for self-aggrandizing motives—not for your good, but for their own egos."

Verse 18 (This is still the NIV): **"It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you."** *"Be zealous for the truth of the gospel. And you shouldn't need me present there with you to tell you that. If you really believed the gospel, zeal for the truth of it ought to issue forth from your own hearts."*

The fact that the Galatians did *not* seem to be particularly zealous about the gospel without Paul there in person seems to bring his focus back to his primary concern: given the ease with which the Judaizers had seduced them away from the fundamental truth of the gospel, was it possible that the Galatians were not genuine believers at all?

He's come full circle now, and that brings him to the final phase of this long appeal. A question, a rebuke, a plea, a warning, and now finally—

5. HE SCOLDS THEM

This is a very *tender* scolding. In fact, he switches from paternal mode into maternal mode. He speaks to them the way a mother would. He uses a warm and familiar expression to address them ("**My little children**"). And he uses the imagery of childbirth to explain why he is so deeply troubled: "**my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.**" Literally, "I am in doubt about you."

He pictures their sanctification like childbirth. And he uses the imagery in a way that underscores how much *he personally* has invested in them. The pain of their delivery into Christlikeness is *his* pain. The yearning to see them become what they ought to be is his personal passion.

This is all deliberately very personal and very warm toward them. It's not a harsh scolding but the plea of someone who loves them like a mother. Notice, he says, (v. 20) "**I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone.**" He is clearly eager to convey a *specific* tone to them. That makes it *especially* significant that he has gone through every tone from harsh severity to tender compassion in these few verses. What tone did he hope to convey?

We know from 2 Corinthians 10:10 that Paul's reputation was that his letters sounded more harsh than he ever was in

person. **"For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.'"** He was more of a softie in person—or at least that was his reputation.

Here he seems to be longing to be with the Galatians so that they could hear the compassion and concern in his voice—and so that they would not think he was merely trying to be insulting or unduly harsh by questioning whether they had really embraced the gospel or not.

So you have to read the closing phrase of our text in that light. This is a broken-hearted, compassionate expression of deep and genuine personal concern. The end of verse 20: **"I have doubts about you."**

Our time is gone and we can't go any further with this now. But let me just say by way of practical application that this is a reminder that we all need to examine ourselves to see whether we are really in the faith. Our hearts are deceptive, and we are easily moved from the principle of grace to a religion of self-righteousness. This is serious business and the gospel is clear. It's not something to be taken lightly, and the nuances of truth are not to be dismissed with a wave of the hand. This is important stuff, and the gospel makes the difference between heaven and hell.

Are you *really* trusting completely in the work of Christ to save you, or are you prone to look at yourself and think

you are all right because you are comparatively "not too bad"? The answer to that question, according to Paul, makes the difference in whether you are truly "in Christ" or just someone who calls himself a Christian but who is following a totally false religion that is an utter waste of time.