

“Gospelizing” the Faithfulness of Christ

Among the Gentiles:

A Study of the Letters to the Galatians and Thessalonians

Diocese of West Texas

Spring & Fall 2010

Study and Reflection Session 5:

Faithfulness Working Through Love

(Galatians 4:12-5:12)

A Translation for Study, with Commentary

Translation of Gal 4:12a

4:12 Brothers and sisters, I beg of you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are.

Commentary on Gal 4:12a

Verse 4:12a gives us a chance for a summary and review, before we move ahead.

Paul’s risk. By taking the *end* of this sentence first, we can see the ground of Paul’s request: he has risked his whole history as a faithful Jew, in the confidence that, through the cross and resurrection, God was abolishing the Law, in order to make a way of faithfulness that would include Gentiles.

- Paul has become “like a Gentile,” by living just as they do, trusting only in the “faith of Jesus Christ” (not the Jewish Law) as a path of salvation. By doing so, Paul is indicating with his

own commitments that the path he is laying out for the Gentiles is not a second-class way of life, but one that he, himself is willing to stake his life on.

- Paul eats with Gentiles, and lives among them without any boundary at all between them.
- “Become as I am” is an invitation to the Gentiles to live by *this* faithfulness alone, the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

Why is the faith or faithfulness of Jesus Christ a way of salvation for those who respond in faithfulness? You may need to look in other letters of Paul, in order to answer this question clearly.

- For instance, read Philippians 2:1-13. Here, Paul tells a story of Christ’s humble obedience to God as an example of a saving way of life for the Philippians.
- Pay special attention to Paul’s counsels, which surround the story of Christ, in 2:1-5 and 2:12-13. If you want to, you can even look further (2:19-30) at the examples Paul gives of Timothy and Epaphroditus who have imitated the self-giving pattern of Christ.
- Paul’s understanding is that the power of God floods into the created world through the actions of people who are willing to take the servant’s role, as Christ did. For Paul, such a life is *true* glory, not the kind of glory that the world recognizes.
- This way of life requires *both* faith *and* faithfulness, *both* trust in God *and* obedience through actions that serve others.

So what has gone wrong in Galatia? How are these churches not following the path that Paul has laid out?

- Some teachers who have a more traditional understanding of Jesus as a Jewish Rabbi, who offered a path of salvation within the Jewish framework, have taught them to keep the Torah fully.

- According to Paul, by adopting the Jewish Law, the Gentiles in Galatia are building back the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile that God abolished through the cross of Christ.
- You can see that, for Paul, the choice to live by the Law rather than by “faithfulness” empties the cross of its full, glorious power. He is adamant about the importance of the reconciling way of life that *he* teaches, a way of life that has the power to unite *all* people in faithfulness to the one God.

Translation of Gal 4:12b-20

You have done me no wrong. 13 You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first gossiped to you. 14 Though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

15 Where, then, is your blessing? For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. 16 Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? 17 They are zealous for you, but not in a good way; they want to exclude you, so that you may be zealous of them. 18 It is always good to be zealous for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you. 19 My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, 20 I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

Commentary on Gal 4:12b-20

Paul recounts his history with the Galatians. Paul seems to want to go back to the beginning of his relationship with the Christians in Galatia, to start over again, as it were, so that Christ may be more

clearly formed in them, more clearly visible through their choice of a manner of life.

- Paul describes how a physical infirmity of some kind, perhaps due to persecution, was the cause of his being in Galatia in the first place (see the reference to this occasion in Study and Reflection Session 4).
- Remember that “gospeling” is a presentation in word *and* deed of the life-giving power of God (Rom 1:16).
- The warmth of the mutual friendship between the Galatians and Paul *should* give him the freedom to tell them the truth about his concern for their choice to adhere to the Torah, but that is not the case. As he says, succinctly: “Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?”

Paul attempts to unmask the duplicity of the teachers who have followed him in Galatia.

- In Paul’s understanding, the other teachers’ “zealousness” for the Galatians is not genuine, but is rather a way for them to insist that the Galatians are not welcomed as they are, but must convert fully to Judaism in order to be “believers” (his word for faithful followers of Jesus).
- For Paul, the teachers’ zeal is really a form of self-aggrandizement, at the Galatians’ expense.

IT IS IMPORTANT FOR US TO UNDERSTAND that this disagreement between Paul and the other teachers over the observance of Torah was *the* central theological dispute in early Christianity:

- What, exactly, was the power of the cross and resurrection?
- Does one need to convert to Judaism to be a follower of Jesus?

These questions were not settled in Paul’s day, but would continue for upwards of a hundred years. It is too easy for us, in the twentieth century, to see the outcome of these controversies as a given. When

we do so, we lose sight of the courage it took in Paul's day to trust in his Law-free gospel, while it was truly brand new.

Where, then, is your blessing? Blessing is a powerful word in Paul's vocabulary. By it, he points to the way in which a person channels the power of God into the world.

- Think of the blessing of Abraham in Gen 12:2,3, when God blesses Abraham so that he will "*be a blessing,*" so that "*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*"
- If the Galatians refuse the pattern of faithfulness established in Christ and, instead, turn to following the Law, what will become of the blessing God intended to work through them for *all* the people of the earth?
- Paul's critique of the Galatians brings to mind the modern criticism: "*It's not all about you!*" Their willingness to live into their blessing is intended to be a *source* of blessing for others.

Translation of Gal 4:21-31

21 Tell me, you who want to be subject to the law, don't you listen to the law?

22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. 23 One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. 24 Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. 25 Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. 26 But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. 27 For it is written, "Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children, burst into song and shout, you who endure

no birth pangs; for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous than the children of the one who is married." 28 Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac. 29 But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. 30 But what does the scripture say? "Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman." 31 So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman.

Commentary on Galatians 4:21-31

Another audacious interpretation. Once again, Paul introduces an audacious interpretation of the Jewish scriptures in order to make his point.

- For Paul, the Torah itself points to the faithfulness he is commending to the Galatians: "You who want to be subject to the Law, don't you even *listen* to the Law?" (4:21).
- Paul is saying, in so many words, that what looks like an innovation is really deeply consistent with the Jewish scriptures.
- It is quite likely that *this very story* had been raised by those who oppose Paul, to support circumcision. Note, for example, Gen 21:4, Isaac's circumcision! Paul cannot avoid responding to their challenge, and so he defends himself with this unusual interpretation.
- In this passage, we get a window into Paul's training as a scholar-Pharisee.
- What would have been your inclination, if you had been a part of one of these early communities – to stay with the tradition, or to follow Paul's lead into a powerful new way of experiencing God?

An allegory. Paul's allegorical interpretation of the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar is quite consistent with standards of biblical interpretation in his day.

- While present-day Christians often tend to read biblical narratives as "history," in the time of Jesus and Paul the scriptures were read mainly allegorically, as containers of timeless truths.
- "Allegory" [Gk., *allēgoreō*] means, literally, to "read otherwise," or non-literally.
- Paul's interpretation is an example of this kind of allegorical reading.

Two mothers, two sons, two covenants. Using primarily Genesis, chapters 18 and 21, Paul gradually develops two very distinct sets of concepts, which he describes as two covenants (though in Genesis there is no explicit covenant with Ishmael, beside the promise that he will be a nation).

- The first set of concepts, linked to Hagar, consists of slavery, the flesh, the Law, the earthly Jerusalem, bearing children into slavery, the child born according to the flesh who persecutes the other child.
- The second set, linked to Sarah, consists of freedom, the promise, Jerusalem above, *our* mother, children of the promise, the child born according to the Spirit, who is persecuted by the other child.
- As in the previous chapter of Galatians, Paul neatly excises the traditional Jewish community from the inheritance of Abraham, and bestows that role on his hearers, if they will *live as* the free children, born of the Spirit.

Translation of Galatians 5:1-6

5:1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

2 Look! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. 3 Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to do the entire law. 4 You who want to be put in right relationship with God and your neighbor [*dikaioō*] by means of the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from the gift of God's power [*charis*]. 5 For through the Spirit, by faith [*pistis*], we eagerly wait for the hope of being put in right relationship with God and our neighbor [*dikaiosynē*]. 6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of practical use, but only faith [*pistis*] working through love.

Commentary on Galatians 5:1-6

A powerful slogan: "For freedom Christ has set us free." Paul sums up the previous argument with this powerful, and easily memorized slogan.

- He characterizes the teaching of the others, which emphasizes male circumcision and observance of the Law, as "a yoke of slavery."
- In these two statements, perhaps Paul hopes to give the Galatians simple counter-arguments to the teaching that he wants to oppose.

A dense and important passage: 5:2-6. Perhaps you are beginning to get a feel for the three very important Greek words that Paul uses in these verses, or perhaps you'd like a little refresher. You might want to get out your usual translation, so that, by comparison, you can see how we have interpreted the words in our translation above.

- *Dikaioō* and *dikaiosynē* are both built on the root *dik-*, which has to do with things being equal, even, or well-balanced. This family of words is used to translate the Hebrew concept of being in right relationship with God and neighbor, which is translated into English by the words “justice” or “justification” or “righteousness.” In English, each of those words has a very distinct meaning, and none of them really encapsulates the original meaning.
- *Charis* is the Greek word that is usually translated as “grace,” but what *is* grace? So often, we hear that grace is a “free gift” from God, but what *is* the gift? Grace is a gift of power from God, intended to work through us, to bring life to those around us. Paul is saying that when the Galatians take on the observance of the law, they cut themselves off from the freely given, and life-giving, power of God in Christ.
- *Pistis*, as we have said above, is both faith and faithfulness, both a confident trust in God and actions based on that confidence. When Paul speaks of “*pistis* working through love,” he is inviting the Galatians to engage in faithful actions of self-giving care for others that become powerful channels of the life of God in our world. To borrow an image from the Gospels, Paul imagines something like the astonishing generosity of God made known through the stories of the feeding of the 5,000. Yes, the people offered the small amount of food they had (a faithful and trusting action), but God powerfully multiplied what they offered, turning it into more than enough food for a large crowd.
- **For Paul, this is the consistent economy of Christian life: our self-offering of faith and faithfulness, multiplied by God’s grace, consistently setting us in right relationship with God and our neighbor.**

Translation of Galatians 5:7-12

7 You were running well; who prevented you from being persuaded by the truth?

8 Such persuasion [away from the truth] does not come from the one who calls you. 9 A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. 10 I am persuaded about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. 11 But my friends, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I being persecuted? In that case the scandal of the cross has been removed. 12 I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

Commentary on Galatians 5:7-12

Paul's high emotions are clear. Paul's harsh comment in verse 12 is a tip-off that he is highly emotional in this whole passage, which can seem like a jumble of thoughts.

- Paul's harsh language, rhetorical questions, and use of irony in this passage give us a vivid sense of his mood and personality at that moment of frustration with the Galatians.
- What is hard to understand exactly is what charges Paul's opponents are leveling against him, since we only have one, somewhat confusing, side of the argument.

"Persuasion." Throughout these verses, Paul is playing on the word "persuade" (*peithō*), which is connected to the word *pistis*, which we have discussed above.

- The task of a rhetorician in ancient Greece was to bring about the persuasion of the hearers to believe in the truth of something (to have faith in it, or *pistis*), or to follow a particular course of action in accordance with what they have come to believe (*pistis* again, as faithfulness).

- When you are persuaded of something, you are confident about it, and naturally base your actions on your confidence.
- According to Paul, the kind of persuasion the other teachers are involved in is not of God (verse 8), and he is confident that the Galatians will eventually see that he is right.

A little yeast. Paul's phrase, "a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough," is a commonplace that he quotes elsewhere (see 1 Corinthians 5:6) when he wants to speak of how a few people can infect an entire community with their misunderstanding or unfaithful practices. Paul is certain that, ultimately, the Galatians will understand fully the truth of his own teachings

The "scandal" of the cross. The Greek word, *skandalon*, means, literally, something to stumble or trip over.

- Remember that Paul understands the crucifixion of Jesus as a criminal to be the "scandalous" means by which God has created a new community of Jews and Gentiles, living in faithfulness together.
- What the world sees as a scandal is, for believers, the powerful entry of God into the world to reconcile all people to God and to one another.
- Paul is clearly incensed that the Galatians would be persuaded to believe otherwise!

Questions for Reflection

1. What situations in our own world are calling for reconciliation? Does God's action in Christ suggest any faithful course of action on our part, to be instruments of that reconciliation?

2. This passage shows us, once again, just how bold Paul was in his biblical interpretation. Remember that at this time there was no New Testament; the Jewish scriptures were the sole scriptures of the early church. Paul's interpretations were important for grounding these communities in a sense that they were a part of the legitimate story of Israel. What guides you in your own interpretations of scripture? Do you read allegorically? historically? literally? Who taught you to read and interpret as you do? What, to you, is the measure of solid biblical interpretation?
3. In earliest Christianity, people considered a person's manner of life to be the surest proof of the value of his or her biblical interpretation. Can you tell a story about someone you know who lives so faithfully that you would want to learn how they interpret the scriptures?
4. It would take great courage to be a follower of Paul in his day, since there was very little support for his teachings, either from the original disciples in Jerusalem, or from the general culture surrounding the Pauline churches. What kinds of encouragement would you need, in such a situation? Do these stories give you some insight into the kinds of people who are our spiritual forebears? Can you tell a story about someone you know with that kind of courage?