

May 25, 2008

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Christ Formed in You

Galatians 4:12-20

12 I beg of you, brethren, become as I am, for I also have become as you are.

It was a strange irony for Paul who was a Jew and became like a Gentile as it were to win them to Christ – that these same Gentiles were trying to become Jews in order to win God's favor. When Paul says 'become as I am' he is saying **'Don't turn back to things that would enslave you once again to a lifetime of trying to win the favor of God – be like me – free in Christ.'** In verse 9 he told them: *But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?* They thought they were progressing in the faith by adding all the elements of religious duty – but Paul said that what they thought was spiritual growth was actually spiritual regression – they were going backward – not forward.

Paul is saying, 'Become like me – *I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and delivered Himself up for me* – become like me. Live this kind of life – a life of faith in Christ – not a life of works of the flesh. Christ has made you acceptable to God – quit trying to add to that.' We may look at these Galatians with a sort of condescending pity – 'How could anyone think that rituals and ceremonies and holy day observances could ever do anything to make you holy?'

And yet by the second century there was a school for Christian leaders that demanded these things of its students: ***"You cannot wear colored clothes as a serious Christian. Get rid of everything in your wardrobe that is not white. Stop sleeping on a soft pillow. Sell your musical instruments and don't eat any more white bread. You cannot, if you are sincere about obeying Christ, take warm baths or shave your beard. To shave is to lie against Him who created us, to attempt to improve on His Work."*** And Paul is pleading with the Galatian believers not to substitute living by the law for a relationship with Christ – and he emphasizes the fact that he does not have anything personally against them – this rebuke and heartfelt entreaty is for their sake and the sake of the truth of the gospel: *You have done me no wrong.*

And then he goes on to remind them of how the gospel came to them in the first place: *13 but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; 14 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.* No one knows what this illness was – but it is certain that it was something that would have normally inspired disgust or loathing on the part of his audience – but the fact that it didn't – the fact that they received him like they would have received an angel of God or even Christ Jesus Himself – should have been enough to keep them from receiving those teachers of another gospel that sought to enslave rather than free them.

15 Where 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.

Paul is reminding the Galatians of the incredible sense of the blessing of God through the gospel when he was with them. ***They were so impacted by the truth of what he shared with them that they would have sacrificed anything just to receive it.*** This may, incidentally give us a clue as to the nature of Paul's illness or handicap since he mentions the fact that they were willing to sacrifice their eyes. Perhaps he had a disgusting eye condition that was repulsive to look at and made his time among them a trial to him. Whatever it was, the point Paul is making is that they would have given anything to get what Paul was giving – and now they are settling for so much less. They were about to sacrifice that sense of limitless joy and wholeness and well-being for slavery to the law and ordinances – to a life of self-effort rather than grace. And as is so often the case, when someone challenges our cherished beliefs, Paul becomes their enemy, not their friend.

16 So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?

Paul is cashing in his relational chips, so to speak, that he earned from the Galatians when he was first with them. It is always dangerous to speak the truth – and it is most dangerous with those to whom we are close. When the truth of God's word cuts right across our desires and cherished positions – it hurts, and we tend to lash out at the one who does the hurting.

This is nowhere more evident than in the church. I have seen absolute friends become absolute enemies when one of the friends tried to share with the other some area of their life that wasn't corresponding to the truth of God's word. Most people don't like to be told they are off – that they have a problem. At some level they may suspect the truth of what is said – but like most of us they'd rather shoot the messenger and hang on to their conceit. I remember many years ago sharing with some friends over a deeply hurtful and troubling situation that I sensed that their reaction was one of fear and not faith – and I came away from that encounter with a lot of holes in me. It was hurtful for them to hear and it was a lot easier to shoot me than deal with their fears.

The fact is, truth hurts – but it is also true that it brings with it healing for our soul. Hosea speaks to this in the 6th chapter: *'Come, let us return to the Lord; for He has torn us, that He may heal us; He has struck us down, and He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live before Him.* Hosea 6:1-2 The wonderful law of God reveals our true condition – rebellious, self-seeking, proud, and hostile to God – and it is necessary for that truth of God to tear us, to wound us, to strike us – so that His healing grace might bind up the wounds, revive us and raise us up so that we might live before Him. And so Paul's letter was meant to expose the Galatian's condition so that they might be healed. His motives were pure – but not so those who preached a different gospel.

Paul says: ***17 They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them.*** Paul says that these guys did not have their best interests in mind – they wanted to shut them out so that they would get the glory – not God. To shut them out here I believe Paul meant that the message these guys preached worked to shut them out, or cut them off from grace. Their teaching had the effect of throwing their salvation all back on themselves – and God was dishonored and grace was trampled in the process. On the other hand, Paul's motives were pure – he was after making disciples of Jesus – they wanted disciples of themselves. He restates this positively in verse 18: ***18 But it is good always to be eagerly sought in a commendable manner, and not only when I am present with you.***

And now Paul comes to the crucial point: ***19 My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you--*** Quite frankly, this verse was a real puzzler to me for a long time. What did Paul mean here – that he was ***again in labor – until Christ is formed*** in you? Was he talking about being born again – again? That seemed to fly in the face of the revelation of Scripture that our salvation is once for all. Was he talking about a process of Christ being formed in us, that is one, long process of Christ growing in us? If so, why then was he laboring for this to happen again? Surely if it was started, then the process goes on till it is completed. No one understands that our growth in Christ is a series of do-overs.

To understand this verse, we need to know how the ancient Greeks understood their action verbs. The important verb in this sentence is the word ***formed***. The literal translation is ***shall have been formed***. In English the emphasis on action verbs is on their relation to time – when did something happen, past, present or future? ***But in Greek the emphasis is on kind*** – what kind of action is this, is it linear, progressive or at a point in time? Did the action take place over a period of time or was it relatively instantaneous? ***And here the verb is the instantaneous kind – not a progression over time.***

So the forming of Christ in us here is not the kind of progressive formation of the character of Christ in the believer – which is another aspect of transformation – ***but an instantaneous formation of something***. We need to know that on the one hand the Christian life is a lifelong progression of becoming more and more like Jesus. As we saturate our minds in His word, as we come to Him in prayer, as we fellowship with the saints – we are transformed in our thinking and our actions and our words until we look like Him.

But that is not what Paul is referring to here. What Paul is referring to here is the forming of Christ in us where He becomes our point of reference for everything. Paul is not talking here about the process of Christian maturity that happens over time – he is talking about the fact that ***the Galatians had lost their center of reference***. We know this too because he tells them in chapter 5: ***You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.*** Galatians 5:4 Those are strong words – yet we should not understand that Paul is telling them that they had somehow lost their salvation. He is saying that their reference point was the law and not Christ, and as a result, in their experience they had been cut off from Christ – cut off from grace. And grace is the power of God to do in us what we could never do – and they had cut themselves off by making the outward observance of the law their center of reference.

What had been formed in them was the law of Moses – as a result, they were severed from grace. When some thought or philosophy is formed in you, your thinking and therefore your behavior is conformed to that. It is like a mold in there and you think and reason and act according to what has been formed.

The Galatians related now to God on the basis of rules and ceremonies and laws – and grace was ineffective in their lives. And Paul says, with tears in his voice if not his eyes, *My children, with whom I am again in labor.* 'Let Christ be your center of reference – let grace rule in your hearts. **Let Christ become your present enjoyment and fellowship.** Don't fall under the yoke of slavery of working for your salvation.'

So what does this mean for us? We're not struggling for the most part with the law of Moses – with ceremonies and rituals and sacrifices and circumcision. As one critic said when he had gone to several churches and heard the preacher say, "Don't try to impress God with your works" or "Don't attempt to please God with your merits" or "Don't try to keep the rules and regulations and earn your way to heaven." He looked around at slumbering collections of utterly casual Christians and wondered, "Who's trying?"

I think what this means for us is that we must not lose Christ as the center. There is the danger in this life of other things coming in and taking His place. For Christ to be formed in us means that we place Him once again at the center of our lives – so that He becomes the way we relate to everything from that moment on. He is the source from which we live. He is the way we handle everything in our lives. He is the one in whom we constantly abide. All our living relates to Christ. How I relate to my husband, my wife, my children – is Christ. How I relate to my boss, my employees, my friends – is Christ. How I shine my shoes, mow my lawn, weed the garden, go to the Mariners games – is Christ. He is at the center of all we do and all we are.

John Piper wrote a short article some time ago with a title that caught my eye: **How To Drink Orange Juice to the Glory of God.** And that intrigued me because instinctively it brought to mind that all of life ought to bring glory to God – and there is something wrong if it does not. And in there he made the statement that **'Sin is leaving God out of account in the ordinary affairs of life.'** *Pierced by the Word p. 28* **What that means to me here is we must not leave Christ out of account in all the affairs of life** – especially the ordinary ones that we think we can handle just fine, thank you very much. To have Christ formed in us is to have Him at the center, He is our sufficiency, confidence and strength. It is in Him that we boast and not in ourselves.

In the journals of John Wesley, he relates the struggle he had before the moment Christ was formed in him. As a young boy in the family of a clergyman he had been "carefully taught" that salvation could only be obtained by "keeping all the commandments of God." Over the years at school and university, he wrote, **"I now hoped to be saved, by, (1) Not being so bad as other people. (2) Having a kind of religion. And, (3) Reading the Bible, going to church, and saying my prayers.' I doubted not but I was a good Christian."**

He was eventually ordained as a minister and lived very strictly, as he put it, "I omitted no sort of self-denial." **But this brought him no peace with God.** He went as a chaplain to the American Colonies and came under the influence of Moravian Christians and on his return to England in that January he realized that what he was lacking was "faith in and through Christ". One evening back in England, he went to a little chapel on Aldersgate Street where someone was reading Luther's preface to the *Epistle to the Romans*. He writes: **'About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.'**

One of the reasons we struggle so much in our lives is that we have something other than Christ at the center. Something else rules our relationships, our choices, our decisions. We have left Christ out of account in the everyday affairs of life and as a consequence we have cut ourselves off from Christ – fallen from grace.

What it means to have Christ formed in us is to have the present experience of the living Christ shape our thinking and our doing so that we are no longer conformed to this age but transformed by the renewal of our mind – to be so formed and dominated by Christ that we can say along with Paul, 'It was not I but the grace of God with me' – to be so shaped by our union with Him that the 'life of Jesus is manifested in our bodies' in everything. *My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you-*

Our gracious God and heavenly Father,

Grant that Christ would dominate our lives – that He would be the power over us and through us – and that nothing in our lives would be disconnected from Him. Make us conscious that everything gets its proper meaning from how it relates to Christ. Father forgive us for making other things our treasure and putting them at the center instead of You. Let the truth of Your word this morning wound us and heal us – let it convict us to the core and replace the lie we have cherished with the truth that saves. May we not live as those who have been severed from Christ and fallen from grace – but let the present experience of the living Christ shape our thinking and our doing so that we are no longer conformed to this present evil age but live as those who have been made glad in God to make others glad in You, we pray in the the life-giving name of Jesus, Amen.

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto You.
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.***