

Galatians 4:12-23 – Christ Formed in You

The Galatian churches were being persuaded to perform certain works of the law to make them justified in God's eyes. The Judaizers were pushing circumcision, observance of certain food restrictions and observance of special days. Paul pointed out that by doing this the Galatians were going back to being slaves of elementary principles. They were abandoning the Gospel of grace. Reliance on works, no matter what the religion, will never make someone righteous in the eyes of God. Only through faith alone, in Christ alone, by God's grace alone can someone be declared righteous before God. The Galatians were being knocked off course by the Judaizers. Paul was urging them to return to the path of faith in Christ and living for God through God's Spirit which dwells in all true believers.

Read Galatians 4:12-20.

In verse 11, Paul expressed a fear that he had labored over them in vain. In verse 12 Paul addressed them as "brothers". He still believed that he was writing to people who were fellow children of God through faith in Christ. How had Paul become like the Galatians? In what way did the Galatians need to become like Paul? (4:12)

What were the circumstances when Paul first preached the gospel to the Galatians? (4:12-14)

In verse 13, Paul talked about his "bodily ailment". Some other translations have "infirmity of the flesh", "weakness of the flesh", "illness" and "sick". What was Paul's "bodily ailment"? Was it the same as his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7). Can we definitely know what Paul's "bodily ailment" was when he preached to the Galatians? There have been many diagnoses.

How did the Galatians receive Paul when he first preached to them? Given Paul's physical condition, what would be the natural response to Paul? Describe the Galatians' level of commitment to Paul. (4:14-15)

What made the Galatians change their view of Paul? What was the real motive of the Judaizers in trying to persuade the Galatians to their legalistic ways? (4:16-17)

What does verse 18 mean?

What does Paul wish he could do to fix the problem in the Galatian churches? How were the Galatians like his children? What does Paul want to see happen in the lives of the Galatians? (4:19-20)

Read Galatians 4:21-26.

If Galatians 4:21-31 was written today it might contain the legal disclaimer “don’t try this at home”. Paul once again challenged the Galatians to learn from the law which bears witness to Christ. It reminds me of when Jesus would say “have you never read”. This passage makes a lot of people nervous. Paul used the word “allegory” which was a bad word to the reformers. People like Origen believed that there was a deeper, “spiritual” meaning to passages. For example, in Numbers 33:5, “So the people of Israel set out from Rameses and camped at Succoth.” (ESV), Origen would give meaning to the names “Rameses” and “Succoth” and draw a deep spiritual message which the modern day readers could apply to their lives. This allegorical method of interpretation was rejected by the reformers. They did recognize types of Christ in the Old Testament but only believed those types could be identified if they were mentioned in the New Testament. For instance, 1 Corinthians 5:7b says "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." (ESV) It is fine to talk about Christ, our Passover lamb, since that phrase is mentioned in the New Testament, but to see any of the details of the Passover as pointing to Christ would be allegorizing the text, according to the reformers. Not all reformed people are that strict with types. But, we must always be careful not to go too far.

When Paul said “do you not hear the law”, Paul used “law” not in the narrower sense of “the law of Moses” but in the broader sense of “scripture”. Who were the first two sons of Abraham? Who were their mothers? Describe the circumstances of these two sons’ births. (4:21-23) See Genesis 16:1-6 and Genesis 21:1-12. Genesis 21:1b-2a "and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age". (ESV)

Compare verses 22-23 to what Paul already said about how Abraham was justified and about who are the true children of Abraham.

Verses 22-23 are historical fact from the book of Genesis. In 4:24-31, Paul went from historical fact to an “allegory”. At the end of the chapter, Paul drew application from the “allegory”. We will discuss these verses next time.

What is the difference between application and interpretation? How many correct interpretations are there for a passage? How many applications can there be for a passage?