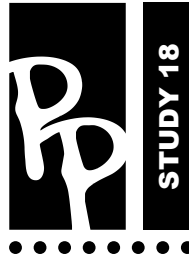


THESE PEOPLE ARE UP TO

NO GOOD



Galatians 4:12-20

This Study Paper contains the following

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- 📁 Some other lessons from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: Angels
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Introduction to the passage

Paul's heart aches for these Galatian believers. His letter to them has been to show them the folly of their ways, how they have been tricked into something of a poorer quality. He has explained to them in some detail the difference between faith and law, he has shown them the big picture of God's plan of salvation and has stirred up their memories of when they first came to faith. In this section Paul makes a personal plea, reminding the Galatian believers how eagerly they received the gospel from him at first. Why are they now being influenced by teachers of error and forgetting Paul's gospel?

What these verses mean

Verse 12

I plead with you, brothers, become like me; for I became like you.

Paul has had to rebuke the Galatians. He has used strongly worded theological argument. Now the love of Paul's heart, as a pastor, begins to show. He calls them "brothers"; he beseeches them; he uses the example of his own life.

He had left the ceremonial ways of Judaism. Because of that, strict Jews would say that Paul had become like a Gentile. So Paul says to the Galatians, who were Gentiles, "I am like you." When he was preaching the gospel to them he lived among them and did not remain separate

from them as a strict Jew would have to do (Acts 13:42,48). But, at the same time, Paul also says, "Be like me" – i.e. trust in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation. Don't put your trust in ceremonies.

You have done me no wrong.

What does Paul exactly mean? The immediate conclusion is that there has not been enmity between them; there was no reason for them to reject what Paul had to say. But Paul, in the context of his pleading, is going much further. He has just said that he, a Pharisaic Jew, had become like them. He turned his back on the law and was no longer dependent on it for righteousness and godly living. Being a follower of Christ, he had God's law written on his heart. Did any harm come to him? By being like them, a Gentile, no wrong had been done to him. Likewise, these Galatians will come to no harm if they give up the foolish notion that they need to follow religious rules and ceremonies.

Verse 13

As you know,

Paul had visited Galatia twice; first, as recorded in Acts 13:13-14:25 and second, Acts 15:40-16:5. He reminds them now what happened on the first visit.

it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you.

There is some uncertainty as to what Paul exactly means in this statement. While it may be unclear for us living today, this would have meant something for his Galatian readers. Either Paul had not originally planned to preach in Galatia, but because he was taken suddenly ill he stayed in that area and so evangelised there, or that he preached to them while suffering some illness. Luke does not mention anything in the book of Acts about Paul's changing plans and going to Galatia because of sickness.

Verse 14

Even though my illness was a trial to you,

Again we are unable to be precise about Paul's sickness. Some have suggested he had difficulties with his eyesight because of the reference in the next verse (16) to the Galatians being willing to tear out their own eyes for him. Also at the end of this letter Paul refers to writing in large letters (6:11). Whatever his illness may have been, it was probably clearly evident and could be seen when he was amongst them preaching God's Word. In the culture of that society, such a sickness would have been loathed by the people, rejecting the ill person as an outcast. ¹

¹ It was common in biblical times for physical disabilities to be regarded as punishments from God (or gods). See John 9:2.

you did not treat me with contempt or scorn.

The Greek meaning of the second phrase is that “you did not spit out”. There was a habit of spitting in the presence of some diseases as an act thought to protect oneself from catching that disease. Although Paul was ill, they were not afraid of his illness – they did not spit!

Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself.

Given the customs of the day, why was Paul not rejected, but instead so well received? The reason was because Paul had come preaching the gospel of Christ with power under the direction of the Holy Spirit. See the incident recorded in Acts 14:11-13. In Lystra, a city in the region of Galatia, the people first thought of Paul and Barnabas as heathen gods. It is not difficult to see how, after conversion, the Galatians would still think of Paul as a special representative of Jesus Christ (an angel) unexpectedly come to them.

Verse 15

What has happened to all your joy?

The Galatians had received the message of Jesus Christ with much excitement and joy. The Spirit took over, they did not notice Paul’s infirmities, but their minds and hearts were taken up with what they heard. Their joy came from a new-found love. It was not the messenger that mattered but the message.

I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.

In other words, they were ready to give him their most precious possessions. (Some have suggested this indicates that Paul’s illness was to do with his eyesight; it is possibly so, but we cannot be sure). What is sure is that the Galatian believers loved Paul dearly then, and thought themselves greatly blessed to have his ministry.

Verse 16

Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

What has caused the change in the minds and hearts of the Galatians? Paul may be referring to what he told them on his visit after the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15:41), or what he has been telling them strongly in the former part of this letter. Are they really now calling the apostle of truth their enemy? Behind it all is the enemy of Christ and his gospel. Satan is on the attack, deceiving and using all forms of trickery. All preachers who stand for the truth of God’s grace are attacked by the enemy. Sometimes it can be physical, other times it is through criticism and complaint. Paul knows that the enemy of the gospel is at work

through the Judaisers, who are now influencing the Galatian converts. The Judaisers are being successful because they have turned the Galatians against Paul and the message he brought to them.

Verse 17

Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good.

Paul now shows to the Galatians their **real** enemies: those who try to capture their affection for wrong reasons. Such people merely want to gain adherents for themselves and for their idea of adding Jewish ceremonies to the Christian gospel. Such people merely want the Galatians to think highly of **them**. (By contrast Paul wants the Galatians to think highly of Christ). It is no different in the world we live in today. In Christendom are many who are wooing people to themselves with all sorts of promises, e.g health and wealth. One thing they do not do is to direct the people to Christ because it distracts the people from them. They are energetic and zealous, but they are up to no good.

What they want is to alienate you [from us] so that you may be zealous for them.

The strategy of the Judaisers is very clear! They are seeking to cut the Galatians off from the apostles and their teaching. They are being persuaded to try to earn salvation by the self-effort of keeping Jewish laws and will consequently exclude themselves from the truth that our salvation was achieved by Christ. This would be the result of being attracted to the Jewish teachers. The Galatians were being isolated and separated, so that they would be cut off from other influences and give themselves to these teachers. Many sects adopt this practice in our modern era. Nowhere does the New Testament advocate such an approach. Firm Christianity does not need protecting and Christian believers who know Bible truths can live freely in the world, being able to discern that which is healthy from that which is poisonous.

Verse 18

It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good,

Being zealous is not wrong. It is the cause for which a person is zealous that matters. In the case of the Judaisers, their zeal was treacherous whilst the Galatians’ zeal was misguided. Zeal for the truth of the gospel is to be commended because it seeks to bring God glory. All Christian believers need to be passionate about the gospel because they have gained eternal life through it. They know that Christ has died for them so that they are reconciled with a holy God. Sadly, such zeal is often lacking in the church today, or else it is misplaced in the human effort of church programmes and activities.

and to be so always and not just when I am with you.

When Paul had been with them and shared the good news of Jesus Christ, the Galatians had become excited and a zeal for the gospel had been the result. Now, if in Paul's absence, other people are trying to gain their affection, they must make sure it is for a good reason, as it was when Paul was with them. Paul considers that he has the right to give them advice like this for they are his children in the faith.

Verse 19

My dear children, for whom I am again in pains of childbirth

Paul compares himself to a mother giving birth to children. He had suffered the "labour pains" of persecution when the Galatians were first converted (Acts 13:45,50; 14:5,19). Now after seeing them backslide by adopting Jewish ceremonies, he feels great pain again. He longs for their spiritual growth not to be hindered by this wrong teaching.

until Christ is formed in you,

Compare 2 Corinthians 3:18, Ephesians 4:13 and Galatians 2:20. This phrase "be formed" was sometimes used by the Greeks to describe the embryo in the womb developing into a normal child. Paul desired the Galatian believers to develop into healthy Christians.

Verse 20

how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!

The tone of voice in which a thing is said can add much meaning to the saying. But Paul can only speak in this letter by written words. He wishes he could be present with them to adjust his tone of voice to make certain his words had best effect. He hardly knows how best to write! He is perplexed about them: has he convinced them of the truth or has he not? Contrast 2 Corinthians 7:16.

It is not clear why Paul could not revisit Galatia, but had instead to write. Perhaps Paul was so busy in Corinth he could not leave (Acts 18).

Notice how Paul's own feelings show so clearly in verses 19, 20. What he wrote is inspired Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16); it is God's Word. Yet it is also Paul's own heartfelt word. The divine inspiration of the Scriptures was not a process of dictation, but a miracle whereby what was written freely by men was exactly what God intended to be written.



Summary

Paul has reasoned with the Galatians, laid before them scriptural argument and taken them to the heights of Christ's glory and how it affected them when they first heard. In this part of the letter, verses 12-20 of chapter 4, Paul makes a personal appeal to them. Paul's physical nature, disfigured or sickly, had not put them off because the message they heard was powerful. At the time they were willing to give things up of their own accord so that Paul would benefit. What had changed them? Well, it was the Judaisers. They were not seeking the glory of God, but their own following. They were not up to anything good. They were turning the Galatians away from Paul, trying to cut them off from him. Isolation is a sign of weakness not strength. Lying behind all this is Satan's ploy that the gospel of grace should not be heard. Persuading people to follow a teaching that relies on human action takes people away from the work of Christ. Paul in writing these things is torn apart inside by pain, like a mother giving birth. Out of labour pains comes life and Paul, perplexed as he is by it all, is seeking that the Galatians will come to their senses and find life in Christ again, though this may be a painful process.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Christians are related to each other!

The Christian Church is not a club, not a collection of separate individuals. One of the illustrations of the nature of the church used in the New Testament is that of a **family**. Christians share the same spiritual life, so they are brothers and sisters. As parents have children, so preachers are used by God in the process of conversion of believers, whom they then regard as their spiritual children.

NB. This fact does not mean that ministers can be called "Father" (Matt. 23:9). Paul does call himself "Mother" (Gal. 4:19; 1 Thess. 2:7). But even when he does speak of becoming a father to his converts (1 Co. 4:15) he carefully adds "in Christ Jesus" i.e. Paul is not their real father, but God through Christ.

These verses show us what loving relationship ought to exist in the family of the church between the teachers and the taught.

1. **The taught.**

They received the gospel message with delight because of the freedom it brought them from slavery to idolatry (verse 8). So great was their delight and love that:

- (a) they overlooked his bodily illness and personal appearance (verse 14).
- (b) they regarded him as a special representative of Christ (verse 14).
- (c) they were prepared to give him their most prized possessions (verse 15).
- (d) they received his message as God's truth; "the blessedness" (verse 16).

We should not be influenced by the appearance of the preacher. If he is faithfully preaching Bible truth and obeying it in his own life, we should receive him as a messenger of Jesus Christ and love him for the truth's sake.

2. **The teacher.**

Paul's attitude to the Galatians was very different from the attitude of the false teachers to them. The false teachers:

- (a) tried to flatter them, for wrong reasons (verse 17).
- (b) sought to isolate them from the pure gospel and from other believers (verse 17).
- (c) tried to make them supporters of their own party (verse 17).

Whereas Paul's attitude to the Galatians was that he:

- (a) always told them the truth (verse 16).
- (b) brought them the gospel of salvation (verse 13).
- (c) sought that Christ should be formed in them (verse 19).
- (d) was deeply pained to see the believers being led away from Bible truth (verse 19).

The false teachers selfishly sought to make the believers to be like themselves. Paul sacrificially sought that the believers should become like Christ. "If ministers wish to do any good, let them labour to form Christ, not themselves, in their hearers" – John Calvin. The preacher should not use the people for his pleasure, but rather be prepared to endure pain for their benefit.

Some other lessons from these verses

1. **Enthusiasm is not a guarantee of endurance.**

They were enthusiastic at first. They were ready to do anything for Paul. But other teachers had come with another gospel. Now these believers are thinking about being circumcised; they are making arrangements to celebrate special days and Jewish ceremonies. They think that Paul is now their enemy! Their early excitement has gone. **Endurance** is more valuable than excitement. See Matthew 13:20,21.

2. **Wrong doctrine leads to wrong living.**

Once they gave up the belief that salvation is by trusting in what Christ has done and began to think that salvation is by trusting Christ **plus** fulfilling Jewish ceremonies, they lost their first blessing. Their lives no longer reflected the life of Christ. They became slaves to the performance of ceremonial duties.

3. **How easily those who have put themselves in the wrong blame others!**

Paul called them "unthinking Galatians" (3:1). It was their own lack of thought that led them to fall under the influence of the flattering false teachers. Yet having put themselves in this wrong position, they accuse Paul of being their enemy!

Focus Point: Angels

Paul mentions *angels* three times in his letter to the Galatians. The first one is in 1:8, the second in 3:19 and the third time in 4:14. References to *angels* are to be found throughout the Bible, from Genesis through to Revelation. A particular theology based on arranging angelic beings into groups of differing importance was developed in the early centuries of the Christian Church. Angels were made into icons, which people worshipped. Angels also featured in paintings influencing to this very day people's perception of these beings. The Christian Church did not examine the subject biblically until the 15th century.

The word *angel* means **messenger**. The same word is used for human and heavenly messengers. God created angels and they belong to his heavenly court and service. Their mission is to praise God and devote themselves to doing his will. Since heaven has come down to earth they have a mission on earth. They accompany God in his work of creation,

though they themselves are created. They assist God in the ordering of his affairs and are involved in the work of reconciliation (to bring man back into the right relationship with God). They rejoice in God's works. As part of their ministry, angels declare God's Word and do his work. This can be summarised in the following activities:-

- Bring messages to people (Matt. 1:20)
- Interpret messages (Zech. 1:9)
- Intercede for God's people (Zech. 1:12)
- Protect individuals (Ps. 91:11) and nations (Dan. 12:1)
- Guide (Gen. 24:40)
- Execute judgement (2 Sam. 24:16)
- Help believers (Heb. 1:14)

Whilst they have appeared on the earth in human form, angels are not physical beings. They are constantly in the presence of God serving as his direct messengers. When men and women respond to God's saving work in Christ, they are raised above the angels. The redeemed in Christ will one day judge the angels, showing us that angels are not faultless in God's eyes. The New Testament warns us against worshipping angels. This was a great danger in the early church. Christ is far above the angels and is worshipped by them.

Some angels sinned and followed Satan. They are part of the kingdom of evil and its powers. These angels and their leaders were defeated when Jesus was crucified on the cross. They will finally be condemned.

Angel of the Lord

In the Old Testament, the *angel of the Lord* is the appearance of God, or Christ, in a form before he came to earth as a man. These appearances of the divine Person prior to the birth of Christ are called *theophanies*.

Sources used: Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (Baker Books) and A Dictionary of Theological Terms (Grace Publications).



Over to you

Are you ever perplexed by the people in your situation? You have been faithful in teaching God's Word, but it seems there is always a group who is never satisfied. You are accused of being too strict and narrow. What should you do?

Preaching should be made attractive for the hearers. In what way should it be made interesting? What could be the danger for you?

If the enemy is against the preaching of Christ crucified and will try anything to spoil this message, should you therefore expect opposition? If you haven't experienced opposition, does that tell you something?