

Two religions, two ministries Gal 4:8-20

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The book of Proverbs has plenty in it  
to entertain the mind of a teenage boy.  
You know how hard it is  
to put God's word away in your mind by memory.  
It takes significant effort  
to make those memory verses stick in the old memory banks.  
And yet some Bible verses just stick in my memory without effort at all.  
One of those is Pv 26:11.  
"As a dog returns to its vomit,  
so fools repeat their folly."  
"As a dog returns to its vomit,  
so fools repeat their folly."  
I'm sure I don't need to explain to you  
why that stuck in the mind of a teenage Tim.  
But you know, I never really thought it would have spiritual application.  
Strange really, being in God's Word,  
I should have expected it to have spiritual application.  
And here we are in Galatians 4.  
4:8-9 "Formerly when you did not know God,  
you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.  
But now that you know God -  
or rather are known by God -  
how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces?"  
The Galatian Christians were in danger  
of being like dogs returning to their vomit.  
They had escaped from something disgusting.  
And now they were voluntarily going back to it.  
How foolish!

But let's think about it for a minute.  
What had the Galatians escaped from?  
Paul has given us a couple of phrases that provide a clue.

Back in last week's passage he said, 4:3

"We were in slavery under the element spiritual forces of the world."

Here he says, 4:8

"You were slaves to those who by nature are not gods."

What's he talking about?

He's talking about worshiping idols.

Before the Galatians became Christians,  
they worshiped idols.

Little statues of Artemis or Zeus or something.

But of course it's not just little statues.

There are demonic powers

that lie behind the things we worship instead of the one true God.

And those demonic powers are out to destroy lives.

And we can see the damaging effects of false worship ever so clearly.

The worshippers of Artemis had orgies with the shrine prostitutes  
and a way of asking for Artemis' blessing on their fertility.

Not hard to see the damaging effects of false worship there.

But even the idols worshipped today  
have demonic powers that lie behind them.

Those who worship their football team  
might imagine that it's ever so innocuous.

But the demonic powers that capture us  
blind us to injustice and oppression.

We are so busy entertaining ourselves  
that we can't see what is happening around us.

Those who worship their money  
might imagine that they are just building a good life for themselves.

But the demonic powers that capture us  
cause us to treat people as means to an end.

We stop valuing people and instead use them.

The Galatians had been slaves to those who by nature are not gods.

And before you gave your life to the service of the Lord Jesus,  
you too were a slave to those who by nature are not gods.

But the Galatians had been freed from all that.

The last verse of last week's reading tells us their current situation.

4:7 "So you are no longer a slave,

but God's child;

and since you are his child,

God has made you also an heir."

Who would want to swap being a child of the living God,

being an heir of God

to go back to slavery?

That would be like being a dog returning to its vomit.

Now here's where it gets interesting.

Were the Galatians actually tempted to go back to worshipping idols?

No they were not.

Were they tempted to go back to the debauched and dissolute lifestyle

that went with worshipping idols?

No, they were not.

Where was their temptation?

It came from false teachers

who were trying to bring them under the Old Testament law of the Jews.

A Law they had never previously followed.

In verse 10 Paul describes it this way,

""You are observing special days and months and season and years!"

They were keeping the rituals associated with special days,

like the Sabbath and the Day of Atonement.

They were keeping special months.

The first month was the month Israel came out of Egypt,

and there were lots of celebrations surrounding the Passover.

The Seventh month was the festival of Tabernacles.

You can read all about it in Lev 23.

And yet Paul says,

"Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?"

Can you see what the apostle is doing?

He's saying that worshipping idols is the same

as bringing yourself under the Law,

and trying to earn your salvation by works.

Both errors make you a slave.  
And as Christian, you are called to be child of God.  
Don't go back under slavery.

We did Two Ways to Live recently on Sunday evenings.  
But Paul is actually saying there are three ways to live.  
You can live the dissolute life of idolatry.  
You can live the legalistic life  
of trying to earn your salvation by keeping the Law,  
or you can live God's way of accepting salvation by grace.  
But both of the first two are in essence the same.  
They are both slavery.  
They both put you under the power of those who by nature are not gods.

Are we tempted to willingly make ourselves slaves again  
after we've become children of God?  
The answer is all too often we are.  
On one hand we turn back to idols.  
Either we make idols of our leisure pursuits.  
We talked about that earlier.  
Or we make idols of our families.  
If you build your life and identity on your marriage partner,  
you will be emotionally dependent, jealous and controlling.  
The other person's problems will be overwhelming to you.  
If you build your life on your children,  
you will try to live your life through your children  
until they resent you or have no self of their own.  
Or we make idols of our stuff.  
If you build your life on stuff,  
you'll be eaten up by worry or jealousy about money.  
You'll be willing to do unethical things to maintain your lifestyle.  
Or on the other hand,  
instead of turning to idols,  
we start trying to earn Gods favour.  
We want to believe God owes us because of how we serve him.

'You've no idea how much I've given up to serve you, Lord'.  
It's as though we ourselves went to the cross of Calvary,  
instead of our Saviour doing it for us.

We need to keep our eyes on Jesus.

What does Paul say the high point of our Christian faith is?

In these verses, the words he uses are

'being known by God'.

The German pastor and conspirator against Adolf Hitler wrote a poem,  
where the climax is being known by God.

I'll read you the last verse as translated by Brian Rosner,  
in his book 'Known by God'.

"Who am I? This or the other?

Am I one person today and tomorrow another?

Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,  
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?

Or is something within me still like a beaten army,  
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me these lonely questions of mine.

Who I really am, you know me,

I am yours, O God!"

You know me, I am yours, O God!

Don't return to slavery.

Neither the slavery of idols or the slavery of rules.

Focus on being a child of God, known and loved by God.

Well we've thought about how we can make the mistake  
of turning away from the grace of God to be enslaved again -  
Whether by idols or by rule keeping.

But the truth is that it's not just what might enslave us,  
it's also who might enslave us.

Idols don't after all walk over to you and ask to be worshipped.

Idols are mute and lifeless.

But often idols come with some passionate advocates

who will make some kind of gain if people worship the idols.  
So in the next section of the reading,  
Paul contrasts his authentic ministry  
with the counterfeit ministry of those  
who want the Galatians to come under the Jewish Law.

How do the two ministries compare?

In 4:12 he says to the Galatians,

"I plead with you brothers and sisters,  
become like me, for I became like you."

Paul wants the Galatians to become like him now,  
rejecting slavery and embracing their status as children of God.  
But when he came to preach the gospel to them,  
he became like them.

That is, he shared his life with them.

He dressed like a Galatian.

He ate meals with the Galatians.

Paul was a Jew to the Jews and a Gentile to the Gentiles  
in order that he might win some.

When I go to see my Kid's Hope boy,

I wear sports clothes because he likes playing sport.

If for some reason I have to wear a suit,

like I did this week, because I had a funeral that day,

I apologise to him.

When we are trying to build relationships for the sake of the gospel,  
we do our best to get alongside the person.

What sort of ministry did the Judaisers do?

Well they told the Galatians

that they needed to keep the Jewish food laws like them.

Their evangelism was like Muslim evangelism today.

Everyone who becomes a Muslim has to adopt the practices of Arabs.

The religion doesn't adapt itself to a new culture.

This is actually an important question for the Anglican Church.

Lots of Anglican churches observe that they have very few young people. And we often talk about how the culture is moving away from Christian faith. Which may be true to an extent. But we often fail to observe that the local Pentecostal church has lots of young people. So it can't be just the culture moving away from Christianity. It might also be that our churches have not kept in step with the style of the surrounding culture.

You might have noticed that I am resolute about trying to make the culture of our 10am service more accessible to younger people. A family chill space, more contemporary music, more informal liturgy. We're not aiming to compete with Connect Church. But we do want to provide an option for those for whom Connect church is a step too far in the informal or loud direction. Why do we want to do this? Because good ministry adapts to the surrounding culture. And we have the luxury of having two Sunday services, so we are free to offer services of two different cultures. Paul says good ministry becomes like the people you are trying to reach.

Good ministry also happens in weakness.

4:13-14

"As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself."

Paul tells us that his initial visit to Galatia was not part of his plan.

He had plans of where he would like to preach the gospel.  
God had other plans.  
And he was forced to stop in Galatia to recover from his illness.  
Why didn't God heal him miraculously?  
I mean as you read through Acts,  
Paul himself healed many people in the power of God,  
he even raised Eutychus from the dead.  
So why wasn't he healed himself?  
Because it was God's plan for him to preach the gospel in weakness.  
God wants the gospel preached in weakness.  
Then there is no question that the power to save came from God,  
and not from the super slick, got it all together preacher.

Paul testifies that the Galatians had received him  
with a joyous and grateful welcome.  
They were overwhelmed with goodness of God  
in bringing them the gospel message.  
Even though Paul's sickness was a pain in the neck to them.  
Whatever it was, and we don't know,  
it was a trial to them.  
But they could see past that at the time,  
because of the unparalleled good news of the gospel.

But you see there's a contrast to the present time  
when he was writing the letter.  
Now the Galatians are treating him with hostility and suspicion.  
4:16 "Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?"  
What's the problem in the relationship of Paul with the Galatian church?  
Well he's been telling them  
that they've been sucked in by a false gospel.  
He's been telling them that they have wandered away  
from the good news of salvation by grace through faith.  
And they have had this other group of false teachers cosyng up to them  
and doing everything in their power to turn them away from Paul.  
Let's not presume for a moment

that this was all about a contest of theological ideas.

This was also a contest for personal loyalty.

In many ways it was no different to grade 3s on the playgroup, playing little power games about who is whose friend, and she's not your friend anymore.

Paul says,

'You loved me when I was a burden to you.

Now I'm just trying to stop you being taken captive by lies.

Could you keep on loving me now?

The people who are trying to supplant me in your affections are up to no good.'

It's like you can imagine your child falling head over heels in love with a thoroughly disreputable and positively unsavoury type.

And their new friend is doing everything they can to isolate your child from you, their parents.

Telling them a whole lot of reasons not to trust you.

That's the position Paul finds himself in.

So how does he conclude?

4:19-20 "My dear children,

for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth

until Christ is formed in you,

how I wish I could be with you now

and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you."

He compares himself to a mother giving birth to their Christian faith.

And they don't gain Christian maturity overnight.

It takes time for Christian maturity to gestate.

And until they have developed Christian maturity,

they are easy prey for malicious people

who would try to pervert their faith with false teaching,

try to win their allegiance for personal profit.

What do we learn from this?

True Christian ministry doesn't shy away from the truth,

even if it presents a challenge to the relationship.

Paul could have secured the loyalty of the Galatians  
by going along with this new teaching  
that they had got all excited about.  
But that would have been to compromise his role  
as an ambassador of the gospel of Christ.

And you know it's the same today.  
I could make my life much easier,  
if I were prepared to say  
that there are other ways to be saved apart from faith in Christ.  
It's quite possible to preach faith in Christ,  
but leave enough wiggle room around the edges,  
that folks can believe that other people might just be OK.  
But that is not faithful to the truth.  
It's false compassion.  
It offers people a comfort that is not based in reality.  
That is a false comfort.

True ministry has to have the love  
that Paul evidently had for the Galatians,  
and the commitment to truth  
which is the demonstration of faithfulness to Christ.

So in summary then.  
Let's not willingly return to slavery,  
Whether by embracing idols or religious good work.  
We embrace the gospel and are children of God.

And let's embrace true ministry.  
Ministry that accommodates itself to those we are trying to reach.  
Ministry that is unafraid to operate out of weakness.  
And ministry that embraces both love and truth.

