

LESSON 9: "A Relational Argument"

Date: November 16, 2014

TEXT: Galatians 4:8-20

INTRODUCTION

Illustration: In the athletic arena and on the business floor, the importance of team has been widely researched, convincingly proven, and energetically preached. It is the growth of a competent and interdependent team that enables one company to grow and expand, while another stagnates or implodes because of its autocratic or splintered leadership. It is the cultivating of strong bonds of knowledge and trust between teammates that takes a football team from a 1-3 start, for example, to a 5-0 run. Just this year in the NFL, one of the most surprising and interesting storylines is the 7-1 Arizona Cardinals, who boast no great stars, but are rather a conglomeration of former pro-bowlers, washed up has-beens, and untested rookies. When one of their veteran receivers was recently asked about their unpredicted success, he answered with a somewhat cliché response that again reiterates the importance of team. "We believe in each other," he said.

When it comes to spiritual stability and success within a ministry, the cultivating of a close, united, interdependent team is likewise of paramount importance. Scripture uses titles like "household," "body," and "family" to picture the interconnectedness of a local church. Yes, it is hard to overemphasize the importance of building relationships in order for fruitful spiritual ministry to be enjoyed.

That relational bond is what Paul now references as he continues to protect the integrity of the true gospel of grace alone through faith alone. Up to this point, Paul's arguments in defense of the true gospel have been based upon objective experience and biblical doctrine.

- Experiential — the experience of the Galatians (3:1-5)
- Doctrinal — the example of Abraham (3:6-9)
- Doctrinal — the expiation of Jesus Christ (3:10-14)
- Doctrinal — the establishment of the Covenant (3:15-18)
- Doctrinal — the essence of the Law (3:19-22)
- Doctrinal — the excellence of faith (3:23-4:7)

And before he finishes his gospel guardianship, he will again return to a Scriptural argument, as we will see in Lesson 10 (cf. 4:21-31).

But for now, in Galatians 4:8-20, Paul breaks away from the somewhat academic and theological discourse he has been providing, and he allows the emotional and relational factors at play to come to the front of his argumentation. He reminds his readers of the unique connection he shares with them (past and present), he demonstrates how he had been a proven spiritual minister among them, and he highlights from that relationship some key reasons why his message should still be committed to and not discarded, as the Judaizers were recommending.

And, so, we add to our list a seventh point in Paul's argument for the true gospel. To his experiential and doctrinal proofs, he now adds a relational one:

- Relational — the endearment of Paul (4:8-20)

Paul pauses to reflect himself and to remind the Galatians of the endearing relationship that had been cultivated between them. He loved that church (vv. 19-20), and they had loved him (vv. 14b-15)—why were they now, to use a modern expression, "throwing him under the bus" (v. 16)? They had allowed the Judaizers to undermine their respect for and relationship with Paul. And although they had initially just abandoned Paul, they were now abandoning his message.

So in this passage, Paul provides a bit of a history lesson and (to use another modern expression) "shares his heart" with those in whom he had invested so much (cf. vv. 11-12, 16, 19-20). It is his goal that the reminder of his endearment for this church would cause them to revive their affection for him and, consequently, reestablish their commitment to his message. Paul rehearses three aspects of his endearing relationship with this church.

PAUL'S MINISTRY TO THE GALATIANS (4:8-12a)

In verses 8-12, Paul continues comparing/contrasting dynamic that he used in the previous section (3:23-4:7). This is evident in "formerly...but now...turn back again" in verses 8-9. Now, however, he adds an emotional component in verses 11-12.

In this first paragraph, Paul simply recalls for the Galatians the ministry he actively participated in among them (i.e., "labor" in verse 11 means

“to exert oneself physically, mentally, or spiritually: work hard, toil, strive, struggle”¹) on his previous visits. He reminds them that his ministry labor had accomplished three spiritual results.

1. Through Paul’s ministry, they had been redeemed from slavery (vv. 8, 9b-10).

Before they “knew God,” which paralleled their introduction to Paul, they “were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods” (v. 9), “to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world” (v. 9b), to the “observ[ing] [of] days and months and seasons and years” (v. 10). In our previous lesson, we defined the Greek word for “enslaved” (*douleuw* [2x in vv. 8, 9]; noun, *doulos*) as “pertaining to a state of being completely controlled by someone or something.”² So, before they met Paul, the Galatian believers were in complete bondage. And Paul describes the nature of their previous master.

- **Deceptive** — “those that by nature are not gods” (cf. Acts 14:11-13)
- **Powerless** — “weak”: “pert. to experiencing some incapacity or limitation, weak”³ (cf. the usage of this word in 1 Corinthians 1:27; cf. a parallel to Paul’s point in Hebrews 7:18)
- **Useless** — “worthless”: “pertaining to being of inadequate or insufficient value—‘of little or no value, relatively worthless’”⁴ especially in its ability to justify and provide and inheritance, key themes in the preceding chapters (cf. contrast with the usage of this word in 1 Corinthians 15:10)
- **Elementary** — “elementary principles of the world”: “Basically it denotes that which belongs to a series, and was applied to such things as the syllables that make up a word, the elements that make up the cosmos, and the notes in a line of music.”⁵
- **Religious** — “you observe days and months and seasons and years”: adherence to the Mosaic calendar, which is obsolete in Christ (cf. Colossians 2:16-17; 20-23)

Whether it was Gentile idolatry (v. 8) or Jewish legalism (vv. 9b-10), it was all bondage. It was only when they met Paul and thereby came to “know God,” that they were redeemed from that slavery (cf. vv. 4-7).

2. Through Paul’s ministry, they had been reconciled to God (v. 9a).

Alluding back to the contrasting identities of Law (i.e., slaves) and faith (i.e., sons) in verses 1-7, Paul reminds the Galatian churches that it was through his ministry that they changed from “not knowing God” (v. 8) to “knowing God or rather being known by God” (v. 9). They were now adult children with full privileges as joint heirs with Christ, and the Holy Spirit within them authenticated that relationship by enabling them to cry, “Abba, Father” (cf. Romans 8:14-17). They were no longer God’s enemies, separated from Him in condemnation—instead, they had been brought back and brought near to God (Ephesians 2:11ff; 1 Peter 3:18)! What a wonderfully intimate relationship they now enjoyed with God!

How had it become theirs? It happened through Paul’s ministry. The “when you did not know God” in verse 8 coincided with “when they did not know Paul.” They had only come to know God and be reconciled to Him when they had met Paul.

3. Through Paul’s ministry, they had been related to by their soulwinner (v. 12a).

Paul exclaims, “Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are” (v. 12a). Paul yearned for the Galatian believers to know the same freedom from the Law in their justification (2:16) and sanctification (2:20) that he had found in Christ. And to help his appeal resonate with them, he had “become as [they were].”

When he came to Christ he had torn away every shred of legalism, in which he had been enmeshed more tightly than perhaps few other Jews of his day (see Phil. 3:4-6). Although he now willingly became like a Jew when among Jews and like a Gentile when among Gentiles, becoming “all things to all men, that [he might] by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:20–22), Paul never represented himself nor thought of himself as anything but a sinner redeemed by Jesus Christ, in whom “there is neither Jew nor Greek, ... slave nor free man, ... male nor female” (Gal. 3:28).⁶

This is a principle of great importance for all who are trying to witness. As Stott says, “In seeking to win other people for Christ, our end is to make them like us, while the means to that end is to make ourselves like them. If they are to become one with us in

*Christian conviction and experience, we must first become one with them in Christian compassion” (in loc.). In other words, while witnessing involves doctrine, it also involves the most personal involvement of the witness with those he is witnessing to.*⁷

Application: Clearly, when Paul arrived in Galatia on his First Missionary Journey, he had authentically and effectively ministered the grace of God. No wonder, then, that he now emotionally expresses in verse 11, “I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.” If they were now turning away from the ministry of this great apostle who had related to them so well, then they were turning back to slavery and destruction (v. 9)!

*How sad for such a faithful servant of the Lord to believe that all the life-threatening, sacrificial service he had given in behalf of the people of Galatia was worthless. All the travel, illness, loneliness, struggles, even the stoning he received in Lystra that left him for dead, was for nothing if they reverted to their old slavery.*⁸

Dear Christian, those who have labored long and lovingly for you should not be easily discarded, especially if you learned from their ministry of the sufficiency of God’s grace and the necessity of faith alone. If God’s minister is proclaiming God’s redeeming and reconciling gospel, is laboring to set you free from sin and deception so that you might know God, and is relating to his hearers with gracious equality and compassion, then cling to that relationship and cultivate team with that servant. Someone who has so richly blessed you should not be so quickly deserted. Someone who is helping you “know God” is worth knowing himself. To allow preferences, perspectives, and opinions contrary to what he has been teaching from God’s Word to divide your relationship with that faithful minister is to sacrifice a wonderful unity that God uses to keep us moored to truth (cf. 2:5).

Transition: Paul is rehearsing three aspects of his endearment to these Galatian believers in order to compel them to return to his message of grace alone through faith alone. If they would rekindle their affection for him (who had never ceased to love them), they would recognize and return to the truthfulness of his message. So, he first recalled his active ministry on their behalf; now in verse 12-16 he considers their initial reception of him on his First Missionary Journey.

PAUL’S RECEPTION BY THE GALATIANS (4:12b-16)

In verses 12-16, Paul chronicles his initial reception among the early Galatian converts. Indeed, in those early days, “they did [him] no wrong” (v. 12b)!

1. **Paul’s physical weakness (vv. 13-14a)**

When Paul first met the people of Galatia, it was in the context of personal weakness (i.e., “ailment” can refer to a medical limitation [sickness/illness] or a more general limitation [weakness]). Paul records in verse 13 that “it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first.” This may simply refer to the persecution he suffered during his First Missionary Journey (cf. Acts 13-14), which would have forced him from one city to the next (i.e., thus, it would have been “because of” that weakness driving him from one city that he “preached the gospel” in another city). Other scholars believe that the reference to offering Paul their “eyes” in verse 15 suggests that his ailment was related to his vision (cf. Galatians 6:11; Romans 16:22; 1 Corinthians 16:21; Colossians 4:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:17). Whatever it was, it has the potential of distancing him from the Galatians, but it instead endeared them to him.

a. **His weakness hindered his ministry ability (v. 13).**

His physical illness may have slowed him down or made him more dependent upon others. It may have rendered him unable to do certain necessary tasks. It may have even been a distraction in his gospel preaching. Whatever it was, it undoubtedly affected him and others, rendering ministry more difficult than it would have been otherwise.



Discussion: *How might a spiritual minister’s physical weakness hinder his ability to minister to those around him?*

b. **His weakness tested their ministry acceptance (v. 14a).**

Paul knew that “[his] condition was a trial to” the Galatians during his previous visits (v. 14a). It was (lit.) a “test” of their spiritual sensitivity and reception. It tested their humility, patience, loyalty, and willingness to push through obstacles in order to know spiritual life and growth.



Discussion: How might a spiritual minister's physical weakness test those he's trying to minister to?

2. **The Galatians' spiritual welcome (vv. 14b-15)**

The new Galatian believers passed the "test," seeing Paul's physical weakness as something trivial in light of his greater spiritual ministry. Therefore, welcomed him into their midst.

a. **The opposite of their welcome (v. 14b)**

Paul first remembers what they didn't do—they "did not scorn or despise" him (v. 14b). The Greek word for "scorn" means "to despise or disdain" and is used in Luke 18:9 with the idea of "looking down upon" and in 1 Corinthians 1:28 with the idea of "considering as nothing." The Greek word for "despise" literally means "to spit out" and can be rendered here "reject"; it indicates the eventual response of such disrespect and disdain.



Discussion: In 2 Corinthians 10:10 and 1 Thessalonians 5:20, what is one area of a spiritual leader's ministry that is often "despised and rejected"? His ministry of the Word in preaching and counseling. We often justify our increasing rejection of a spiritual leader by picking apart his sermons and counsel. Because we "don't agree" with this and that point in his teaching, we excuse ourselves to disregard the man's character, disrespect the man's position, and eventually desert the man's ministry.



Discussion: From Isaiah 53:3, how can a spiritual minister be encouraged when he is "despised and rejected"? Jesus Christ was also "despised and rejected" by those He came to minister to (that us!), and yet He continued to do without becoming bitter and without giving up. He loved us unto the end!

b. **The perspective of their welcome (v. 14b)**

Paul next remembers how the Galatians did treat him—according to verse 14b, they received his message ("as an angel") and authority ("as Christ Jesus," for He was "an apostle...through Jesus Christ and God the Father" [1:1]).

c. **The manner of their welcome (v. 15b)**

Paul remembers and testifies "that, if possible, [they] would have gouged out [their] eyes and given them to [him]" (v. 15b). They were willing to greatly sacrifice on his behalf.

d. **The result of their welcome (v. 15a)**

Paul's question in verse 15a ("What then has become of your blessedness?") is meant to help them remember the satisfaction and joy they had experienced when they welcomed Paul's initial ministry. God's special favor had been theirs when their ministry relationship with Paul had been intact. Now, that "blessedness" had abandoned them, even as they were abandoning Paul.

Application: At this point in his history with the Galatians, Paul hadn't changed—they Galatians had! He was still physically weak, yet actively engaged in ministry. But, they were no longer so warm towards him. It is that relational numbing that Paul questions in verse 16—"Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?" It was no fault of Paul's, but instead his commitment to truth (cf. 2:5), that had driven a wedge between him and these people he loved.



Discussion: What do 3 John 3-4 and 2 Timothy 4:1-5 contribute to this observation?

Dear Christian, do not allow your spiritual leadership's unwavering commitment to truth dull your appreciation for their faithfulness, affection for their person, and attentiveness to their message. Instead, recall to your own mind how they were first used in your life to awaken spiritual desire and how you so greatly enjoyed their presence and conversation. Allow that history lesson to reawaken your gratitude for how God has used them and to reaffirm your loyalty to their biblical message.

Paul isn't suggesting that he's God's gift to mankind that should just be unquestioningly revered and followed; he isn't implying that he's always right and whatever he says goes. But he is remembering a "blessed" connection that he had enjoyed with these Galatian believers, a loving unity that could only have come from God and that pleases God (cf. Psalm 133). And, in reality, Paul was God's gift to the Galatian churches (cf. Ephesians 4:11-14). They seemed to have realized that "at first"

(end of v. 13), but now they had taken that gift for granted, too, and were abandoning his endearing relationship with them. He who had been their “friend,” they now regarded as an “enemy.” It is no wonder, then, that Paul momentarily pulls away from doctrine in order to argue on the basis of relationship. He loved these people, and he wanted them to reaffirm their love for him.

Transition: Having remembered his initial ministry among the Galatians and their initial reception of him, Paul rehearses one final aspect of his endearment to these Galatian believers as he continues to draw them back to the true gospel. This final aspect is his most emotional—he simply assures them of his love for them.

PAUL’S LOVE FOR THE GALATIANS (4:17-20)

The phrase “make much of you” (vv. 17, 18) translates the Greek word *zelow* and means to “be positively and intensely interested in someth.: strive, desire, exert oneself earnestly, be dedicated.”⁹ It refers to the zeal that both Paul (v. 18) and the Judaizers (v. 17) had for these Galatian believers. A closer look, however, reveals a world of difference between how the Judaizers loved the Galatian believer and how Paul loved them.

1. **The contrast of Paul’s love (vv. 17-18)**

In these two verses, Paul simply contrasts the character of his passionate burden for the Galatians with the zeal of the false teachers.

a. **The passion of the Judaizers (v. 17)**

Their zeal was “for no good purpose,” Paul says in verse 17. That harmful purpose is stated at the end of the verse—they were passionately working among the Galatian churches so “that [the Christians would] make much of them.” They weren’t directing people’s attention to God (cf. 1:24; 2:20; 6:14)—they were glorifying themselves. In order to do that in a “Christian” ministry, they had to distract and deceive, and that is what Paul means by stating that “they want to shut you out.” They worked to (lit.) “exclude” the believers from truth (v. 16) and thus to “exclude” them from the loving apostle himself, so that they

might eventually “exclude” them from focusing on God. They “made much of” the believers and not of the truth, so that the believers would “make much of” them and not of Paul or Christ!



Discussion: *What paradox is evident between their desire to “exclude” the Galatian believers and Paul’s use of “exclude” in Romans 3:27?*

b. **The passion of Paul (v. 18)**

In contrast to the deceptive and harmful passion of the Judaizers is the beneficial zeal (i.e., “for a good purpose”) of Paul in verse 18. Having already specified some ways in which his ministry had been spiritually beneficial for the believers in Galatia (cf. vv. 8-12a; cf. Colossians 1:24-2:5), Paul now highlights one additional point of contrast that speaks volumes concerning his selfless integrity against the selfish dishonesty of the false teachers. They were merely passionate for the Galatian believers like bloodthirsty wolves in the midst of the sheep; Paul’s zeal for the Galatian believers was at all times and “not only when I am present with you” (as is evident by his ministering through this letter). When the wolves are driven out, they don’t continue to love and labor for the sheep, for they never did when they were masquerading among the sheep. It is only a true shepherd who loves and labors from a distance.

2. **The character of Paul’s love (vv. 19-20)**

Paul’s emotional argument reaches a climax in verse 19-20. In these two verses, Paul demonstrates the character of his loving attitude toward the Galatian Christians.



Discussion: *From these verses, what characteristics of Paul’s loving attitude do you discover?*

a. **Personal tenderness**

Paul calls them his “little children” (v. 19).

b. **Emotional turmoil**

Paul illustrates his burden for them as being “again in the anguish of childbirth” (v. 19).

c. Purposeful task

Paul's burden is accompanied by an active labor to help "Christ [be] formed in [them]" (v. 20). That was always Paul's focus, as is evident by what he wrote to the church in Colossae in Colossians 1:28-29—"We proclaim [Christ], warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me."

d. Concerned transparency

Paul openly reveals, "I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you." He is honest about his concern for them and isn't afraid to verbalize a confronting rebuke.

Application: Dear Christian, allow the proven love of your spiritual ministers to assure you of their authenticity (John 13:35—i.e., if they have proven love for you, then they have proven to be Jesus' disciples) and allow you to benefit from their ministry. Don't forget or despise their "labor of love" (1 Thessalonians 1:3), for God doesn't (Hebrews 6:10), and it was His love for you that compelled Him to give them to you. When they show you tenderness, don't disdain it as mere piety; when they seem stirred, don't write it off as emotional manipulation; when they are more consumed with "Christ in you" (cf. Colossians 1:27) than you are, don't try to hide or harden up; and when they transparently confront you with their burden for you, don't resist it as "too personal" or "who gives you the right." God has given them the right and the responsibility to "watch over your soul" (Hebrews 13:17). Don't treat them like the Galatians, turning away from their passionate love for you in favor of the false love of a false teacher. Ultimately, that will be as "unprofitable for you" (Hebrews 13:17, KJV), as it was for these troubled Galatians (cf. 1:6-7). See, if you abandon your loving and proven spiritual leaders, you may be one step away from abandoning their message.

CONCLUSION

When spiritual leaders are laboring so endearingly for their flock, it powerfully testifies to the veracity of their message. Their "labor of love" for the flock is a very God-like relationship, and it should cause

those to whom they minister to stay close to the truth of God's Word. In fact, one cannot help but notice here some rich parallels between Paul's shepherding style toward the Galatians and God's shepherding style toward us.

Consider first the way in which Paul is shepherding the Galatians here:

Paul's love for the Galatians never wavered. The Galatian's love for Paul had waned, causing them to forsake him and reject his message. Paul reiterates his unchanging affection for the Galatians while also verbally confronting them. He hopes that his love for them will rekindle their love for him. And that reaffirmed love would cause them to return to Paul and to his message of truth.

Dear Christian, is this not how God shepherds us? Consider the parallels:

God's love for us never wavers, for He loves us with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3). Our love for Him often does wane (Revelation 2:4), causing us to forsake Him and reject his message (cf. Malachi). God reiterates His unchanging love for us over and over again in the pages of His Word and our own personal experiences, also verbally and circumstantially confronting our hardened wills. He labors so that His love for us will rekindle our love for Him, for after all, "we love because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). And that reaffirmed love for God causes us to return to Him and to His message of truth.

The endearing relationship we enjoy with godly under-shepherds should not be taken for granted. Instead, their "labor of love" authenticates their ministry and should compel us to stay close to them and to their message of truth.

ENDNOTES

¹ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 558.

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 471.

³ Arndt, 142.

⁴ Louw 621.

⁵ Kent, Homer A. Jr. *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Colossians and Philemon*, Revised Ed. Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1987. Pp. 86-87.

⁶ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Galatians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 115.

⁷ James Montgomery Boice, “Galatians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 478.

⁸ MacArthur, 112.

⁹ Arndt, 427.