

Galatians

Gospel-centered ministry

Study 8 | Galatians 4:8-20

The reason for the letter to the Galatian churches was the appearance of false teachers. Paul has been contrasting his teaching with their teaching. In this passage Paul contrasts not so much his doctrine with their doctrine, but his ministry with their ministry. As a result, we get insights about how the gospel practically affects our relationships with others.

READ Galatians 4:8-20

- 1. What kind of religion did the Greek Galatians have before they heard the gospel — a Biblical one or an idolatrous one? What kind of religion are they in danger of turning to now? What are the implications of Paul calling a prospective lapse a “turning back” to idolatry?**
- 2. In verse 9, Paul says that they know God and then seems to correct himself and says, “...or rather are known by God.” Why does Paul add this correction? What principle is he getting across? How is this an antidote for works-righteousness?**
- 3. What brought Paul to the Galatians? What does that teach us about suffering and thwarted plans (Cf. 2 Cor. 12:7-10)? Can you provide personal illustrations of this in your own life?**
- 4. How and why had the Galatians’ relationship with Paul changed (vv. 14-16)? What is Paul's purpose in bringing up this change?**

5. (vv.16-17, 19-20) How does Paul's ministry differ from the ministry of the false teachers as to it's goal and means?

6. (vv.12-14,19-20) What other characteristics of healthy relationships can you draw from these five verses? Does this characterize your small group fellowship?

EXERCISE

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Idols of the heart

A. THE DEFINITION OF IDOLS

Romans 1:25 tells us that idols are not sinful things, but **good and basic things elevated into being ultimate things** (v.25 – *worshipped... created things rather than the Creator*) We look to them for meaning in life, for covering our sense of insignificance, for developing a “righteousness” or worth.

“An idol is anything in our lives that occupies the place that should be occupied by God alone. Anything that... is central in my life, anything that seems to me... essential... An idol is anything by which I live and on which I depend, anything that... holds such a controlling position in my life that... it moves and rouses and attracts so much of my time and attention, my energy and money.”

— D.M.Lloyd-Jones, “Idolatry” in *Life in God: Studies in 1 John*

“[Each person] acts as if God could not make him happy without the addition of something else. Thus the glutton makes a god of his dainties; the ambitious man of his honor; the incontinent man of his lust; the covetous man his wealth; and consequently esteems them as his chiefest good, and the most noble end to which he directs his thoughts... All men worship some golden calf, set up by education, custom, natural inclination and the like... When a general is taken, the army runs. [Even so] this [the main ‘idol’] is the great stream, and other sins but rivulets which bring supply... this is the strongest chain wherein the devil holds the man, the main fort...”

— Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*

“...that most basic question which God poses to each human heart: “Has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart’s functional trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight?”

Questions... bring some of people’s idol systems to the surface. ‘To who or what do you look for life-sustaining stability, security and acceptance? ...What do you really want and expect [out of life]? What would [really] make you happy? What would make you an acceptable person? Where do you look for power and success?’ These questions or similar ones tease out whether we serve God or idols, whether we look for salvation from Christ or from false saviors. [This bears] on the immediate motivation of my behavior, thoughts, feelings. In the Bible’s conceptualization, the motivation question is the lordship question: who or what “rules my behavior, the Lord or an idol?”

— David Powlison, “*Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*”

B. THE EFFECTS OF IDOLS

1. Distorted thinking

Romans 1:21 tells us each idol creates a **delusional field**, a whole set of assumptions and false definitions of success and failure which are distortions of reality brought on by the idol (v.21 - *their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened*).

“[Your] idols define good and evil in ways contrary to God's definitions. [They spin out a whole false belief system.] They establish a locus of control that is earth-bound: either in objects (e.g. lust for money), other people (e.g. ‘I need to please my father’), or myself (e.g. attainment of my personal goals). Such false gods create false laws, false definitions of success and failure, of values and stigma. Idols promise blessings and warn of curses for those who succeed or fail [their standards]. ‘If I [make enough money], I will be secure. If I can get these certain people to like and respect me, then my life will be valid.’...”

— David Powlison, *“Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair”*

2. Emotional bondage

Romans 1:25 tells us that each idol “darkens the heart” and enslaves us (v.25 - *worshipped and served created things*). Whatever we worship we must serve. The way the idol enslaves is that it creates **over-desires, inordinate longings**.

“Idols of the heart are graphically portrayed in Ezekiel 14:1-8... If ‘idolatry’ is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for our drift from God, then ‘lust’ [*inordinate* desires], **epithumiai** is the characteristic and summary New Testament word for that same drift. (See summary statements by Paul, Peter, John, and James as Gal.5:16ff; Eph.2:3, 4:22; I Pet.2:11, 4:2; I John 2:16; James 1:14ff, where **epithumiai** is the catch-all for what is wrong with us.) The tenth commandment [against ‘coveting,’ which is idolatrous, inordinate desire for something] also... makes sin ‘psychodynamic.’ It lays bare the grasping and demanding nature of the human heart, as Paul powerfully describes in Romans 7... the NT merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate, life-ruling desires... for lust, demandingness, craving and yearning are specifically termed ‘idolatry’ (Eph.5:5 and Colossians 3:5).”

— David Powlison, *“Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair”*

3. The sin under every sin

The Ten Commandments begin with two commandments against idolatry. Then comes commandments three to ten. Why this order? It is because the fundamental problem is always idolatry. In other words, **we never break commandments 3-10 without first breaking 1-2**.

“A careful reading of the Old and New Testaments shows that idolatry is nothing like the crude, simplistic picture that springs to mind of an idol sculpture in some distant country. As the main category to describe unbelief, the idea is highly

sophisticated, drawing together the complexities of motivation in individual psychology, the social environment, and also the unseen world. Idols are not just on pagan altars, but in well-educated human hearts and minds (Ezekiel 14). The apostle associates the dynamics of human greed, lust, craving, and coveting with idolatry (Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5). The Bible does not allow us to marginalize idolatry to the fringes of life... it is found on center stage."

— R. Keyes, "The Idol Factory" in *No God but God*

This means then, that *idolatry is always the reason we ever do anything wrong*. Why do we ever lie, or fail to love or keep promises or live unselfishly? Of course, the general answer is "because we are weak and sinful," but the specific answer is always that there is something besides Jesus Christ that you feel you must have to be happy, something that is more important to your heart than God, something that is spinning out a delusional field and enslaving the heart through inordinate desires. So the secret to change is always to identify the idols of the heart. The Bible does not consider idolatry to be one sin among many (and thus now a very rare sin only among primitive people). Rather, *the only alternative to true, full faith in the living God is idolatry*. All our failures to trust God wholly or to live rightly are due at root to idolatry — something we make more important than God. There is always a *reason* for a sin. Under our sins are idolatrous desires.

C. IDENTIFYING OUR IDOLS

1. Every self exists in relation to values perceived as making life worth living. A value is anything good in the created order — any idea, relation, object or person in which one has an interest, from which one derives significance...

2. These values compete... In time, one is prone to choose a center of value by which other values are judged... [which] comes to exercise power or preeminence over other values.

3. When a finite value has been elevated to centrality and imagined as a final source of meaning, then one has chosen... a god... One has a god when a finite value is... viewed as that without which one cannot receive life joyfully. (To be worshipped as a god, something must be sufficiently good... Were my daughter not a source of exceptional affection and delight, she would not be a potential idolatry for me, but I am tempted to adore her in a way... disproportional.)

4. Anxiety [Idolatry and the future]

Anxiety becomes neurotically intensified to the degree that I have idolized finite values... Suppose my god is sex or my physical health or the Democratic Party. If I experience any of these under genuine threat, then I feel myself shaken to the depths.

5. Guilt/Bitterness [Idolatry and the past]

Guilt becomes neurotically intensified to the degree that I have idolized finite values... Suppose I value my ability to teach and communicate clearly... If clear communication

has become an absolute value for me, a center of value that makes all my other values valuable... then if I [fail in teaching well] I am stricken with neurotic guilt.

6. Bitterness becomes neurotically intensified when someone or something stands between me and something that is my ultimate value.]

7. Boredom/Emptiness [Idolatry and the present]

To be bored is to feel empty, [meaningless.] Boredom is an anticipatory form of being dead. To the extent to which limited values are exalted to idolatries... [when any of those values are lost], boredom becomes pathological and compulsive... My subjectively experienced boredom may then become infinitely projected toward the whole cosmos... This picture of the self is called despair [The milder forms are disappointment, disillusionment, cynicism.]”

— Thomas C. Oden, *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia* Chap. 6

Answer the following:

a. If you are angry. Ask: “Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am angry, because I am being blocked from having something I think is a necessity when it is not?” Write down what that might be:

b. If you are fearful or badly worried. Ask: “Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so scared, because something is being threatened which I think is a necessity when it is not?” Write down what that might be:

c. If you are despondent or hating yourself: Ask: “Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so ‘down,’ because I have lost or failed at something which I think is a necessity when it is not?” Write down what that might be:

Circle the thoughts that are lodged in your heart:

Power idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I have power and influence over others."

Approval idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I am loved and respected by _____"

Comfort idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I have this kind of pleasure experience, a particular quality of life."

Image idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I have a particular kind of look or body image."

Control idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I am able to get mastery over my life in the area of _____."

Helping idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — people are dependent on me and need me."

Dependence idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — someone is there to protect me and keep me safe."

Independence idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I am completely free from obligations or responsibilities to take care of someone."

Work idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I am highly productive getting a lot done."

Achievement idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I am being recognized for my accomplishments, if I am excelling in my career."

Materialism idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom, and very nice possessions."

Religion idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I am adhering to my religion's moral codes and accomplished in it's activities."

Individual person idolatry: "Life only has meaning/ I only have worth if — this one person is in my life and happy there and/or happy with me."

Irreligion idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I feel I am totally independent of organized religion and with a self-made morality."

Racial/cultural idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — my race and culture is ascendant and recognized as superior."

Inner ring idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — a particular social grouping or professional grouping or other group lets me in."

Family idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — my children and/or my parents are happy and happy with me."

Relationship idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — Mr. or Ms. 'Right' is in love with me."

Suffering idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — I am hurting, in a problem — only then do I feel noble or worthy of love or am able to deal with guilt."

Ideology idolatry: "Life only has meaning /I only have worth if — my political or social cause or party is making progress and ascending in influence or power."

Answer these diagnostic questions:

- a. What is my greatest nightmare? What do I worry about most?

- b. What, if I failed or lost it, would cause me to feel that I did not even want to live? What keeps me going?

- c. What do I rely on or comfort myself with when things go bad or get difficult?

- d. What do I think most easily about? What does my mind go to when I am free? What preoccupies me?

- e. What unanswered prayer would make me seriously think about turning away from God?

- f. What makes me feel the most self-worth? What am I the proudest of?

- g. What do I really want and expect out of life? What would really make me happy?

Summary:

Now that you've answered the questions above, look for common themes. Write below what you think are your functional masters? What things tend to be too important to you?

E. HEALING IDOLATRY WITH THE GOSPEL

1. Avoid the “Moralizing” Approach.

A very typical approach to personal change among orthodox and conservative Christians can best be called the “moralizing” approach. Basic analysis: **Your problem is that you are doing wrong. Repent!** This focuses on behavior but doesn't go deep enough. We must find out the why of our behavior. *Why* do I find I want to do the wrong things? What inordinate desires are drawing me to do so? What are the idols and false beliefs behind them? To simply tell an unhappy person (or yourself) to repent and change their behavior is insufficient, because the lack of self-control is coming from a belief that says, “Even if you live up to moral standards but don't have *this*, then you are still a failure.” You must replace this belief through repentance for the one sin under it all — your particular idolatry.

2. Avoid the “Psychologizing” Approach.

A very typical approach to personal change among more liberal religious groups can best be called the “psychologizing” approach. Basic analysis: **Your problem is that you don't see that God loves you as you are. Rejoice!** This focuses on feelings, which seem to be deeper than behavior but it also fails to go deep enough. We must also find out the why of our feelings. *Why* do I have such strong feelings of despair (or fear, or anger) when this or that happens? What are the inordinate desires that are being frustrated? What are the idols and false beliefs behind them? To simply tell an unhappy person (or yourself), “God loves you — rejoice!” is insufficient. The unhappiness is coming from a belief that says, “Even if God loves you, but you don't have *this*, then you are still a failure.” You must replace this belief through repentance for the one sin under it all — your particular idolatry.

3. Adopt the “Gospel” Approach.

Basic Analysis: **Your problem is that you are looking to something besides Christ for your happiness. Repent and rejoice!** This confronts a person with the real sin under the sins and behind the bad feelings. Our problem is that we have given ourselves over to idols. Every idol-system is a way of our-works-salvation, and thus it keeps us “under the law.” Paul tells us that the bondage of sin is broken when we come out from under the law — when we begin to believe the gospel of Christ's-work-salvation. Only when we realize in a new way that we are righteous in Christ will the idol's power over us be broken. “*Sin shall not be your master for you are not under law, but under grace*” (Rom.6:14). You will only be “under grace” and free from the controlling effects of idols to the degree that you have both repented for your idols and rested and rejoiced in the saving work and love of Christ instead.

“The faith that... is able to warm itself at the fire of God's love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness... It is often said today, in circles which blend popular psychology with Christianity, that we must love ourselves before we can be set free to love others... But no realistic human beings find it easy to love or forgive themselves, and hence their self-acceptance must be grounded in their awareness that God accepts them in Christ. There is a sense in which the strongest self-love that we can have... is merely the mirror image of the lively conviction we have that God loves us.

Moralism, whether it takes the form of either denunciation or “pep talks,” can ultimately only create an awareness of sin and guilt or manufactured virtues built on will power... We all automatically gravitate toward the assumption that we are justified by our level of sanctification, and when this posture is adopted, it inevitably focuses our attention not on Christ but on the adequacy of our own obedience. We start each day with our personal security not resting on the accepting love of God and the sacrifice of Christ but on our present feelings or recent achievements in the Christians life. Since these arguments will not quiet the human conscience, we are inevitably moved either to discouragement and apathy or to a self-righteousness [some form of idolatry] which falsifies the record to achieve a sense of peace...”
— Richard Lovelace, The Dynamics of Spiritual Life

Discussion questions**1. What helped you most?****2. What questions were raised?**