

February 12, 2017
Lesson 11: Gal. 4: 8-20
New Birth Brings Freedom

Context:

The scripture for this lesson focuses on chapter four of Paul's letter to Galatians. In this chapter Paul makes several claims about who the church is supposed to be and uses analogies to help them understand their purpose.

In this specific passage of scripture, Paul addresses several things including some of the struggles of those in the church. In verses eight through eleven he focuses on some of the main issues that have bubbled up within the church and are creating tension as people resorted back to their old religious backgrounds and tendencies before they became a part of the church. With those who were Gentiles, there was a tendency to float back to the pagan worship. There was a focus on offering food to gods, building idols to worship, and forming a cult around certain gods. With those who were Jewish before becoming Christian, there was a focus on returning to the law and the Torah observations like becoming circumcised and observing certain religious festivals. Paul wants them to understand is that they now belong to God. They are no longer tied to the pagan traditions or focusing on the Jewish festivals that were important to that faith. Different teachers from different segments of the early church were floating around and creating more division within the body that was trying to figure out who they were and what they believed as a church. The writer wants them to stay focused on the main things and not drift back into the habits and practices that would divide them.

The next section is one of the most interesting in all of the writings of Paul. Verses twelve through twenty reveal that even within the early church, there was tension between the teachings of Paul and the teachings of those who were advocating for different things. Apparently Paul was sick at one point of his ministry and there was rejection. Yet the people continued to love Paul and welcome him as an angel of God and continued to keep him there. As more teachers came to them, there was perhaps even dismissal of Paul and his teachings so much so that Paul felt the need to address the tension and remind them of their time together. He references their early time together to remind that they are all one. Anyone who likes to exclude others has beliefs that cause tension in the body. Because of all the tension, Paul desire to be back with them so they could process all things. Like a parent, Paul feels the pain of a child that rejects their parent as the church debates his own intentions and teachings. He wants to see them grow so much in Christ that they are able to come together as one and see Christ in one another. Paul is truly vulnerable and lays everything out to process so that they can move forward into the future.

Application:

There are several things we can glean from this chapter in Galatians that speak to the here and the now and help us become better brothers and sisters in Christ.

The first point from Paul's section is about how the church members have a

new identity in belonging to God. They should have a new focus and a new purpose in belonging to the church and one that changes them. One of the things I love to hear about people is their own faith journey and about the places that helped shaped and molded them to be the Christian they are today. Some people have wonderful stories about coming to the faith and felt the power of Christ come alive by hearing a certain sermon, reading a special scripture, experiencing an awakening in a worship service, or having a friend help them understand more about themselves and about Jesus. They are wonderful stories to hear and can help other people grow. But as a pastor you also hear the hard stories. Some stories have heartbreak where they were hurt by the pastor or the church. At times, the individuals did not realize until later or never did at all. And so those people hurt left the church wondering if there was a place for them at all. Paul's words and the reality is that the church should be a safe place. The church should be a place where people can ask deep questions about the faith and wrestle with life. It should be a place where people can be reminded that God loves them and that God is at work in their lives. And it should be a place where other people are on the same journey and want to find the right ways to help one another grow in love and faith.

The second point comes in the second section as Paul pleads for the church to remember that he is a part of their church. In the midst of tension, he reminds them that they are to look at the time before and see the goodness that was there. And more importantly they are to remember that they are all a part of Christ's body as we are to see each other as if we were just sitting right next to each other. How appropriate we read these words in one of the most digital/technological periods in our history! It seems even the ancient world had its share of people attacking each other and then having to use the pen to lash back out and give a defense. But Paul makes the point of how he wishes he could be present with people so that he could change his tone.

As I read this passage I thought of all the hurt that can be caused by misunderstanding and not talking to each other. Often times I watch people get online and make comments that I do not think (and certainly hope) they would ever say to someone in real life. Would you really say that to someone if they were sitting across the table from you? If you were dining with them, and a controversial issue arose, what would you do? If it looks like anything found in the comment section of AL.com or any other news sources, I hope you would consider your words before posting something. Words have the power to heal and words have the power to do incredible damage. All of us have our opinions, and all of us have certain things we feel strongly about in our own experiences. But as you formulate those, think about how God views that person and remember that they too are a brother or sister in Christ. As Christians, we have a command to love one another just as Christ loved us. That means watching our words, hearing one another's stories, and remembering that we are all God's children.