

Galatians: the Heart of Paul's Gospel to the Galatians

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Biblical Quotations from the New American Bible

Fathers can be gentle and warm but they can also be tough and severe at times. I remember every spanking I received from my father—and I always deserved it. His hand was so large and so was its impact upon me (no pun intended). It always redirected my behavior and brought about a commitment to avoid such punishment in the future. But because my father loved me and gave his time and affection to us kids I was able to accept the discipline of love upon my backside. I always had more respect for my father at that moment than at any other time. He loved me enough to be tough and demanding. He loved me enough to cause short-term pain to instill long-term character.

Love should not be confused with simply being nice. Though love often includes being nice, “niceness” is certainly not a synonym of real love. Love is often tough and can initially be perceived as hard or insensitive. A new church in the far off land of Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey, heard some of Paul's harshest words and threat of discipline, and rightfully so, for he was their father in the faith. He speaks sternly to his children but he speaks even stronger to their enemies. He speaks with a righteous anger and exasperation to the Judaizers who intended to upset the applecart and ruin the souls of his children. Thus Paul stepped in as a protective loving father and he stepped in with both feet.

But let's set the stage first. Galatia was located in modern Turkey and Paul wrote to them between AD 48 and 54 (the exact location and date has been a matter of intense debate, outside the scope of this article). Paul traveled north from Israel into this land and preached the gospel of grace to Jews and Gentiles alike. The Galatians received the word from Paul “as an angel of God” (Gal 4:14).

But, after receiving the good news from Paul they began listening to others from Jerusalem who confused them with heresy. Heresy is an unpopular word today—politically incorrect—but it has been an essential word throughout the history of the Church. The word originally meant a “choice or self-willed opinion” and then was used to describe an unorthodox teaching, one that was wrong and damaging which usually ended up by causing a division. There were heretics who came to the Galatians saying Paul was wrong and only presented a partial truth.

To understand the great frustrations and drama swirling around this vulnerable new church in Galatia, one must first understand a pinnacle chapter in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 15). The issue was one of race and religion. It was one of divided societies and the requirement of the New Covenant to integrate previously separate societies. The Jew and Gentile had to become one in Christ. But how? Some of the Jewish converts said that to become a Christian the uncircumcised pagan had to first become a Jew. They said “Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved”.

Needless to say, this caused many problems and was not a great boon to evangelism (Acts 15:1).

The Galatians began to crumble and fear they were not saved by grace and faith as Paul had delivered it to them. Maybe Paul was wrong! Maybe he had only given them part of the truth? Maybe they should abandon Paul and his teaching. Yet, Paul would not stand for his children being dismayed and confused by the traveling heretics and trouble makers. Paul argues that circumcision is not necessary and scolds the Galatians as any loving father would. He gets tough!

“O stupid Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” Some translations render this as “foolish”, but the NAB uses the word “stupid” signifying Paul’s disappointment in their senseless and unworthy lack of understanding. Paul speaks forcefully to get their attention. And at the end of his letter Paul is so frustrated with those demanding Gentile circumcision for their entrance into the Christian faith that he vents his righteous indignation by wishing they would slip with the knife and cut off more than intended, the male organs, saying, “Would that those who are upsetting you might also castrate themselves!” (NAB).

Theology is not the only argument Paul uses; in fact, he comes at bewitched believers from every angle: arguing from the Old Testament, especially using Abraham as Exhibit One. Was Abraham justified before God by circumcision and following the many requirements of Moses to earn his salvation? Of course not. When was Abraham justified? Wasn’t it before circumcision, before Moses, before all the 613 laws of Moses? How was Exhibit One justified: as a Jew or a Gentile? Wasn’t Abraham a pagan Gentile from a pagan land? Was God’s first requirement circumcision? No. Was it faith and obedience? Yes. “Abram put his faith in the Lord, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness” or as other translations render it “he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness”.

So in the courtroom drama that Paul sets up the key witness and exhibit flies in the face of the Judaizers who claim to be the sons of Abraham but in actuality teach contrary to the example of Abraham the father of Faith. Abraham’s example demonstrates that the Judaizers were wrong, preaching the need to “obligate God” through efforts to “earn” salvation.

Paul also uses his own impressive life story. If anyone was knowledgeable of these matters it was him? He reminds them that he “persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it, and progressed in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my race, since I was even more a zealot for my ancestral traditions” (Gal 1:13–14). He was a Jew of Jews and trained in the Law more than them all—he knew what he was talking about. And did his gospel contradict that taught by the apostles in the great mother Church in Jerusalem? No, he had confirmed his gospel with them and had been given the right hand of fellowship by Peter himself. So, why were they listening and being deceived by the false teachers and heretics?

“Are you so stupid? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?”, which is a sarcastic reference to circumcision. Don’t you understand, he says, that there were “false brothers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, that they might enslave us—to them we did not submit even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain intact for you”. The father speaks harshly but truthfully. He speaks with tough love to save his children from confusion, slavery, and damnation. Justification is through faith (which of course included the aspect of obedience within its very fabric and definition) in Christ and not through Jewish ritual performed on the flesh. This is the very heart of this fatherly epistle—and the heart of the New Testament.

Martin Luther and others following in his wake interpreted this great epistle of liberty outside of its historical, cultural and religious context. They anachronistically read into it the Protestant arguments against the Catholic Church. In so doing, like the Judaizers, they misrepresented the full Gospel, not by adding to it as the Judaizers had done, but by stripping it of its fullness, something on which Father Paul would have been just as tough.

Romans and Galatians deal with the same themes and arguments though Galatians is much more personal and impassioned; whereas, Romans is theoretical and formal. He knew and loved the Galatians as his own children, the letter to the Romans was written to those not personally close to Paul. Galatians may possibly be the “rough draft” of which Romans the full text. Like Romans, Galatians is an intensely Catholic epistle. The foundations of the Catholic Church reach deep into these letters and to understand them in their fulness one needs to read and listen to them in their native environment which is within the heart of the Church and understanding the milieu of the first century.

Some interesting things to notice in this epistle. Paul informs us in 2 Corinthians 12:8 that God had given him some physical ailment, a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble and to demonstrate God’s great strength even through the ailment. In Galatians there may be clues as to what the “thorn” was. It might have been an eye disease, possibly brought on by the light that blinded him at his conversion (Acts 9:8). He writes “it was because of a physical illness that I originally preached the gospel to you” and “if it had been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me” (Gal 4:13–15). Why say this if the physical ailment and eyes were not related? Later Paul concludes, writing the last few lines with his own hand, “See with what large letters I am writing to you in my own hand” as though his eyesight prevented him from writing in the finer script of his scribe which had preceded. He may very well have been legally blind by modern standards.

This is a short epistle, probably just a “pamphlet” by today’s standards, but in this short letter Paul packs incredible passion and content. It is like a tightly compressed zip file in a computer. It takes time and work to unzip this tremendous piece of literature. In it Paul’s soul shines brilliantly displaying his keen logic, his biting and even sarcastic irony and his tender affection. It is powerful in every detail. With a little imagination you envision Paul dictating this letter with the animation of an actor, the tears of a distant parent, and the intensity of a master debater. This is one of his treasures and few written

documents have been loved and studied more intensely.

Paul closes with irony and a pun, a clever play on words. He has mentioned his own physical ailment and wounds sustained for the gospel—the marks of the cross, figuratively speaking— and says “From now on, let no one make troubles for me; for I bear the marks of Jesus on my body” which is a sharp and pointed contrast to those who want to make their marks of Moses on the new believers—marks made with the knife on human flesh. Then lastly, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers [not the law of Moses on your flesh]. Amen brothers. Amen.” He ends up by giving them the dignity of brothers, and not just children, but expects them to live up to that relationship not only with himself, but with Christ the liberator!

Text boxes:

“Some who had come down from Judea were instructing the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved’. Because there arose no little dissension and debate by Paul and Barnabas with them, it was decided that Paul, Barnabas, and some of the others should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and presbyters about this question. . . . But some from the party of the Pharisees who had become believers stood up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and direct them to observe the Mosaic law.’ The apostles and the presbyters met together to see about this matter. (Acts 15:1–2, 5–6)

St. John Chrysostom (c. 347–407): The [introduction] is full of a vehement and lofty spirit, and not the [introduction] only, but also, so to speak, the whole Epistle. For always to address one’s disciples with mildness, even when they need severity is not the part of a teacher but it would be the part of a corrupter and enemy. Wherefore our Lord too, though He generally spoke gently to His disciples, here and there uses sterner language, and at one time pronounces a blessing, at another a rebuke” (*Homilies on Galatians*) (Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series: Volume XIII, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997.)