

## A Challenge to Conform

Galatians 4: 12-20

As we come to the passage before us, we discover a clear and distinctive shift in Paul's approach. Up until now, Paul has boldly defended and argued for the truth of the gospel, presenting one doctrinal argument after another to expose the false doctrine of the Judaizers. He had well defended that salvation was by grace through faith in Christ alone, apart from any works of the flesh.

The approach in the text we are considering is much more personal and compelling for the Galatians. Paul reveals his heart for the people and his desire for them to embrace the truth, while standing strong in the faith. It appears that Paul wanted them to understand why he had been so adamant in exposing the Judaizers – he genuinely loved the church and wanted her to be settled in the faith. He was not just an angry theologian; he loved the church.

As we examine the [admonitions](#) of Paul, I want to consider: [The Challenge to Conform](#).

**I. The Appeal of Paul** (12) – [Brethren, I beseech you, be as I am; for I am as ye are: ye have not injured me at all](#). Here we discover the heart of a committed pastor for the church. He desired the Galatians to be as he was – he longed for them to embrace the gospel by faith alone, refusing to adhere to the false teachings of the Judaizers. If anyone understood their struggles, it would have been Paul. He was as they were – he had faced the rituals and demands of legalism, but turned from works of the flesh unto faith in salvation. If one such as Paul, having been as committed a Pharisee as anyone, could embrace the truth of the gospel apart from works, they could as well.

➤ Paul commended the church for their affection and care for him. They had never hurt or injured Paul. They shared a common bond through the gospel, and there should be no division among them.

**II. The Affliction of Paul** (13-16) – Desiring to assure them of the love and devotion he has for them, Paul spoke of the struggles he had endured, many of which they had walked alongside him as he endured them. The behavior of some made no sense when compared with their past support. Consider:

**A. His Dedication** (13) – [Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first](#). Unfortunately, Paul does not provide details of the infirmity of which he spoke, but the Galatians would have well understood. It is evident that he was very sick when he first arrived at

Galatia. Some speculate it may have been an illness Paul picked up on his first missionary journey, or possibly the thorn in the flesh that he begged God to provide deliverance. Whatever the infirmity, Paul was faithful to preach the gospel in spite of his illness. His dedication to the gospel and the church exceeded his desire for personal comfort.

**B. His Affliction** (14a) – *And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected.* Paul affirms the church did not despise, nor reject Paul due to the physical affliction he suffered. The word translated temptation has the idea of “*adversity, affliction, or sorrow.*” While this may appear to be nothing more than reasonable compassion, we must understand the context. In that day and culture, afflictions and disease were often viewed as signs of divine judgment. Often the sick and afflicted were shunned and expected to remain separate from society. Although Paul had been afflicted, the church in Galatia had shown great compassion and care for him.

**C. Their Compassion** (14b-15b) – *but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus.* <sup>15b</sup> *for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me.* Upon Paul arriving in Galatia, the church had received him as they would have an angel or the Lord Himself. They refused to allow Paul’s difficulties shape their opinion of him. He was received in light of the Lord he shared and the service he performed in ministry. He reminded the Galatians that some were willing to have given him their eyes, had it been possible to do so.

➤ Some argue that Paul’s thorn in the flesh must have been a problem with his eyes or his vision, and they cite this verse as an argument for their case. The truth is, we really do not know what Paul’s affliction was. It very well could have been a vision problem, but it also could have been some other affliction. Since eye disease was prevalent then, with few options for healing, having good eyesight was a blessing. Some argue that Paul was merely using an illustration to refer to their compassion for him, being willing to give their own eyesight for Paul if possible.

**D. His Confusion** (15a, 16) – *Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?* As Paul considered the resistance he faced from some within the church in regard to his exposing the Judaizers as false teachers, he was perplexed. Some who had originally been willing to make significant sacrifices for one who preached the truth, now appear to have turned on him due to his stand upon the faith. Paul is merely asking, “What happened to the compassion and commitment to truth you once had? Have I become your enemy because I refuse to embrace heresy and have confronted you with the truth?”

➤ Such rejection of truth and hurtful treatment of the messenger was concerning and confusing for Paul, and it should be for us today. Anyone who has faithfully preached or taught the

truth, for any length of time, has faced a similar situation. Often, when people begin to depart from the truth, they become angry with those who continue to stand firmly on the truth. “Were those times of fellowship and worship sincere? If so, what has changed? If you believed the truth I once taught, which is the same as the truth I continue to teach, why am I now viewed as an enemy?”

**III. The Ambition of Paul (17-20)** – Although the current treatment and reception of some within the church was questionable, Paul remained committed to lead Galatia in doctrinal truth. Notice:

**A. His Caution (17)** – *They zealously affect you, but not well; yea, they would exclude you, that ye might affect them.* Paul cautioned the church regarding the motives of the Judaizers. They had zealously affected the church, but not in a good way. They had been successful in leading some from the truth. The desire of the Judaizers was to exclude, *to literally shut them out*, from the truth of the gospel, in hopes they might seek the Judaizers and embrace their doctrine. It is apparent that the Judaizers were not concerned with the spiritual well-being of the church; they merely wanted to force others to conform to their doctrine. (Any doctrine that deviates from the truth shares the same motivation – it seeks to validate the personal desires of those who promote false teaching. The concern is not spiritual, but physical and egotistical.) *Matt.23:15 – Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.*

**B. His Exhortation (18)** – *But it is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing, and not only when I am present with you.* Having offered a loving rebuke, Paul sought to encourage their zeal. He wanted to encourage them to remain zealous for the truth, even in his absence. He had been zealous for the church regarding the gospel when he arrived, and such zeal was to be commended. It seems that Paul was exhorting the church to possess as much zeal for truth as the Judaizers had for their false teaching.

➤ It is easy to become engrossed with activities and current needs. In, and of themselves, such commitment to particular causes is not necessarily sinful or contrary to Scripture. However, we must guard our zeal and ensure we remain zealous about those matters that are consistent with Scripture. We must ensure our zeal remains for the main thing, keeping the gospel at the forefront of all we endeavor to accomplish.

**C. His Passion (19)** – *My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you...* Paul revealed his main concern for the church in Galatia – that Christ be formed in them. Paul was committed to presenting the truth in such a way that it would always result in

transformation. He wanted to see the church continue to grow and mature in Christ, being conformed to His image. [Rom.13:14 – But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.](#)

**D. His Frustration** (20) – [I desire to be present with you now, and to change my voice; for I stand in doubt of you.](#) Paul was clearly perplexed with the church in Galatia. He had shared the true gospel with them while he was there, and many had received the gospel. Yet, now it is apparent that many were questioning their faith and turning from the truth. He longed to be present with them, seeking to affirm their faith, and be able to speak with them in a more warm and conciliatory tone. However, Paul had begun to doubt the faith of some within the church. He appears to now be at a loss for words. If their faith in the gospel, along with his affirmation of truth, were not enough to convince them, there was little else to be said.

➤ I admire the dedication and boldness of Paul. He offered exhortation and encouragement as he could, but he refused to compromise the truth, even among a church he had labored so intently. We need that same commitment to truth. We cannot compromise doctrine for the sake of cooperation. Truth remains truth, regardless of those who deny and reject it.

**Conclusion:** It is clear that Paul loved the church and was concerned for her well-being. He refused to abandon truth, regardless of the personal cost. Likely, he lost friends in Galatia and infuriated some Judaizers, but that was a price he was willing to pay. He challenged the church to conform to Christ and live according to truth. Such is the need in our day. We need those, like Paul, who will stand for truth regardless of the cost.