

The kids aren't alright

Galatians 4:8-31

'Can we talk? I'm really worried about you. I'm afraid that you're forgetting everything I brought you up to know. You've changed - you don't look at me the same anymore. You used to welcome me in the door with a big smile and a hug; you used to say you'd do anything for me... and I knew you meant it.'

'Now, though... now you treat me so differently. You scowl at me like I'm ruining your life by telling you the truth. You know what? Honestly - I just don't get you! I don't *understand* how you could change like this; how you could *become* like this! My heart is tearing over what you're doing!'

Paul wrote a *letter* to the Galatians. It wasn't just a book of theology outlining a logical argument about being innocent before God by grace through faith in Jesus. A lot of Galatians *is* that, especially in chapters 2-3, which we've looked at in recent weeks.

But Galatians is more than this. It's a *letter*. From a person, to people - people that Paul loved and cared so much about, as a father to his teenage children in the faith who are starting to walk away from it. Look at vv.11. Gut-wrenching worry about the choices the kids are making, as if they haven't taken on board anything you've taught them.

Then there's vv.15-16. Feeling like the wide-eyed kids who so adored you treat you like the enemy now. And vv.19-20. The real, felt pain that the children still need something from you before they can live without you, something that they're not taking; and the sense that you just don't *understand* your children.

In vv.8-20, Paul exposes three ways in which the kids aren't alright. And it will serve as a helpful health check for our lives with God, as individuals and as a church family together, if we can measure up our attitudes and behaviours against this to see if we have any hidden relational trouble with our Father God.

Paul's first concern about his spiritual kids in Galatia is in vv.8-11. He's worried that they are turning back to what they were enslaved by before they'd found freedom and fullness of life in Christ. He talks in v.8 about being 'slaves to those who by nature are not gods.'

We're back to talking about idols again. Idols are all those things that we make biggest in our lives. The things we put before God. The things in which we seek identity, security and significance. The things which, as Tim Keller puts it, '...control us as we seek them; disappoint us as we find them; and devastate us when we lose them.'

We've been over this stuff before in this series - your idol might be actually worshipping a god other than the One whom the Bible tells us sets us free through Christ Jesus.

Or it might be putting money, sex or power first.

It could be reputation, career, exam results.

It might be the right school or uni.

It might be a circle of friends, or a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife, the children - or the idea of children.

It might be TV, computer or other entertainment that you live for.

It might be living for the weekend, or living for the holiday.

It might be the house, the garden, the car, or just having at least as good a one of those as next door has.

It might be neighbourhood politics, or national politics.

The Bible teaches that a lot of these things are good, and have their place - a place under God, not above Him. Anything that we place first in our lives above Him is an idol, and whether we realise it or not, we become enslaved to that idol - emotionally, psychologically, spiritually.

The thing about these idols which 'by nature are not gods,' is that like anything that is not God, it doesn't live forever - and neither do those who are slaves to them. The trouble for us human beings is, we go back to the idolatry we're familiar with more easily than we press on into the new life God calls us to in Jesus Christ.

It's a strange phenomenon, this: If you free an animal from captivity and release it into the wild, it often chooses to return to captivity. If you free some people from prison and release them into life, they do what they need to do to get themselves back into the confines they've known.

When God redeemed and freed Israel from slavery in Egypt and led them on the Exodus into the free wilderness, they pined for the days of slavery when they knew where they were and what they were up to. Maybe freedom scares people. Maybe we don't know what to do with it because we can't

control it and we'd rather be controlled in ways more familiar to us. 'Better the devil you know', they say.

Except, of course, it's not! Jesus Christ died to set us free from slavery to the idols that once owned us. And through that, we are adopted into a family, God's family, in which we are *free*. In v.9, Paul says, 'you *know* God!' But then he corrects himself '...or rather, you are *known by* God.'

Question - What does Paul's change of emphasis in v.9 tell you about what a Christian is?

Through Jesus Christ, there is a relationship which changes everything. A relationship between you and God the Father. Now, in that relationship, there's one person whose affections wax and wane; who thinks about the other person one day and forgets Him for the next four or five. That's us.

But there is - more importantly - a person whose affection, dedication and commitment towards the other person is constant, day by day, and promised forever. That's God. Through Christ, we know God in relationship, and more importantly, He knows us in relationship. Discovering *that* is freedom.

The Galatian Christians had discovered this life and freedom in Christ, but now they were in danger of returning to the idols they'd left behind. Except, hang on a minute... These people used to be pagans, worshipping actual physical idols. But they're not seeking to do that again... they're seeking to worship the God of the Bible, by becoming like the Jews and following their rules and rituals. What's Paul on about, then?

Well, Paul is on about this - *religion is idolatry too*. Biblical legalism is an idol, just like money, sex, power and anything else that's put in the place of Jesus Christ our King and Rescuer. Starting to 'do religious things', acting like you or other people have to dress like this or talk like that can become idols.

'Coming to church' can be an idol. 'St. Columba Church' can be an idol, if we think and behave as if our salvation or other people's is only found here in *our* church. *It's only found in knowing and depending on Jesus Christ.*

That's something that Paul describes pretty forcefully in his illustration in vv. 21-31. He goes back over the story of Hagar and Sarah. We read that story in our series in Genesis. Abraham was promised a son, and he tried to achieve that promise his own way, by sleeping with his slave girl Hagar and having a son, Ishmael.

But God intended to give him a son by Sarah - old, infertile Sarah - and God did just what He promised He'd do. Sarah gave birth to Isaac, the child of God's promise. The slave girl and her son were sent away, cast out as those who were never to receive the inheritance of the promise.

Paul uses this story as a picture of who inherits life with God, but he does it with a twist that's a slap in the face to the law-keeping religious Jews. They had grown up believing that they were 'children of Abraham.' Sarah's children are described as free, as receiving God's promise, as being citizens of Heaven. The Jewish teachers in Galatia thought that was them.

Paul says, no - these Jews who are slaves to the law keeping they trust in, aren't identified with Sarah and her child - they're identified with Hagar and her child! He's describing fine upstanding Jews as just the same as pagan idolaters, cast away from life with God and His inheritance.

Here's Paul's stark and insulting truth to tell, and you'd best be ready to measure yourself by it. *Religious people are outcasts.* They're idolaters, slaves to an idol that is not God. God said, 'believe in my Son and you will live.'

Religious people said, 'Yes, but also dress like this, behave like that in church, don't associate with *them*, don't go to places like *that*, come and change your cultural identity to become churchy, become more bland and vanilla and be much less fun than you were, then you will live.'

The problem that religious people have is that they don't realise they're idolaters. They think they're alive when they're dead; they think they're safe when they're heading for destruction. The irreligious at least know that they're far from God. That's why Jesus talked about how it was easier for thieves and prostitutes to enter His Kingdom than religious do-gooders.

They knew that they did not have God, but that they needed Him - so they knelt before Him. The religious, on the other hand, thought they *did* have God, but didn't *really* think they needed Him - so they puffed out their chests and refused to crumple over in humble confession.

Did you swap your idols when you became part of 'church'? Did you give up sex, drugs and rock and roll or career, money and reputation; and swap it for a warm and fuzzy club with nice people who'd be nice to you every Sunday morning?

The newsflash is that trusting in being good or being churchy is as fatal as trusting in the idols you left behind. The sense of community, friendship, or institutional identity that church offers is not your deepest need; nor the thing that will fill the void in your heart. The forgiveness of God and restoration of a relationship with Him through faith in Christ - *that's* the good news.

Question - What things about our church's life and behaviour threaten to become bigger to us than trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection?

So the first thing Paul is worried about is the priorities the kids are choosing; the idols they're defining their lives around. The second thing is to do with how the kids are changing their attitudes to him as their spiritual father.

In vv.12-16, Paul remembers fondly how much love and welcome the Galatians showed him when he first met them and shared God's good news with them. vv.13-14 tell us that Paul had been struck with an illness - the kind of illness that caused him to be quite a burden to the Galatians if they were going to welcome Paul into their lives.

But welcome him they did, and not just grudgingly. They welcomed Paul as if an angel had come to them; as if Jesus Christ Himself had come to them. They lavished their welcome and encouragement and help upon him. What Paul says in v.15 - that they would have torn out their eyes for him - was apparently a common form then of what we say today in cards and films and songs - 'I would do anything for you.'

But Paul feels like their joy in him is gone. And he asks them in v.15 *where* it has gone. In v.16, he asks them directly, 'Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?' Paul's hurt. They've cooled in their affections towards him. More than that - they think Paul's the bad guy now, because he's telling them things that they don't want to hear.

Again, I imagine that some parents of teenagers can relate to this experience best. To have had these children who soaked up everything you told them and trusted it all with kind eyes; and then to have them shut you out because you haven't flinched from telling them true and helpful things and warning them when they're heading for danger.

Now you can start off your life as a Christian full of joy, love and gratitude towards the people who led you into life in God's family, enjoying the grace and freedom and love you've been welcomed into in Christ. But there's a

danger that you start to change your attitude towards them when those same people challenge you about your discipleship; when they confront you with home truths that aren't so warm and fuzzy.

You don't need to read between the lines here because I don't feel like this is how any of you are acting towards me as a pastor. St. Columba continues to be a warm and encouraging church family, and I know that I can ask any of you to tear your eyes out for me, and you'll do it. I'm just deciding which one of you's got the nicest eyes, first...

That's not why I'm saying these things. I'm saying them because they are there in the passage, and learning from God's Word today will help us to stay close as His family tomorrow.

What if one day you are heading for danger in the choices you are making in your life, and I or your Life Group leader or any of your brothers and sisters here challenge you about how that matches with being a disciple of Jesus? Will your affections towards us cool? Will we become your enemies because we're telling you the truth?

How about the other way round? What if one day I'm heading for danger, and you see it and challenge me about whether my life and actions are in line with the gospel? Will my affection towards you cool? Will you become my enemy because you told me the truth?

I pray not. And I plead that as a church, we will be loving and warm and trusting enough of one another to say, 'tell me when I'm wandering and sinning, and even if I think you're wrong, I'll show you all the same joy and love and warmth that we've always shared.' In the days ahead, folks, we will need that.

I also plead with all of us who have a leading and discipling role to be more concerned with faithfulness to God and His gospel than with whether folk like us. I'm thinking of me and my preaching. If, when I preach, I'm only telling you things that make you think you're great and make you want to tell me I'm great, somebody should probably slap me.

I am thinking too of our Leadership Team, Life Group leaders, and all our children's group leaders. I'm thinking of the informal mentoring relationships many of us have. I'm thinking of parents discipling their children in faith.

Paul was not a people pleaser. In chapter 1, we learned that he was accused of that. But he blasted out a fiery rebuttal of that and said, in 1:10, that being a Christian and being motivated by people's approval of you are mutually exclusive. This whole letter, he's been telling the Galatians straight, 'you're doing wrong, and you're heading for danger.'

This is not a license for being rough and brusque with people, and making a virtue of being someone who calls a spade a spade. Being proud of standing out with such a persona is just one more idol that needs toppled. It is, however, a genuine plea, especially to our leaders and disciplers, that we would first and foremost be concerned with *what God says*.

We take Him at His Word. We believe His promises. We obey His commands. And when we see brothers or sisters around us not doing that, we have the integrity and courage that Paul had to risk personal pain and relational hurt because we care enough to say, 'you need to stop that.' In the days ahead, folks, we will need that.

The third thing Paul's worried about for the kids is that they've got a lot of passion, but it's being directed the wrong way. vv.17-18 talk about zeal. The Jewish false teachers have got a lot of zeal, and it's directed towards winning Galatian people to their cause.

The Greek here might be suggesting that they're flattering the Galatians to get them to flatter them back. Or it might be that the Jewish Christians were playing hard to get, alienating the Gentile Christians and making them jump through hoops to belong in some kind of power trip. Either way, the Jewish false teachers weren't passionate about the Gentiles getting to know God. They were zealous about the Gentiles being like them.

The Galatian Gentile Christians were, in turn, in danger of being passionate about becoming 'proper Christians' - becoming like the Jewish false teachers to feel like they really belonged. All of this was misdirected zeal, misdirected passion, and the problem is that misdirected zeal leads people *away* from Christ, not *towards* Him.

In v.18, Paul tells us that zeal and passion are good. That is, if it's directed the right way, it's constant, and it's not just for show. So, what are you passionate about? That's a question that we've often asked our guest speakers before they talk to us, and 'the Lord Jesus' is kind of smirked at as an obvious, unoriginal answer that doesn't score many points. Well, frankly, it should.

What am I passionate about? I could say Heather and the kids, I could say (despite the hopelessness about it) Scottish rugby, I could say the music of Beethoven. Actually, I really love the first of these, I'm crushed in spirit by the second, and I'm lifted in spirit by the third. But being passionate to the point of *zeal* about any of these things would be a problem.

Being zealous has an all-consuming sense about it. Where you invest your zeal and drive and reason for living matters, because your zeal leads to an identity forming within you.

Some people's zeal forms them into racists. Some into green activists. Some into homophobes, others into gay rights lobbyists. Some into religious devotees, others into missionary atheism. Some into their careers. Some into politicians. Some into artists in music, drama and visual arts. Whether good, bad, or neutral - zeal is formative. Everybody's trying to save the world with their zealous cause.

In v.19, Paul expresses the anguish of a parent in labour. I know, ladies, he'd never have known what it's really like... But Paul says that he's in pain until these Galatians focus their passion not on a cause, but on a person. Until they are zealous about knowing God through Jesus, until *Christ* is formed in them, the birth pains continue.

Just as a mother in labour wants the baby out to live independently of her body, Paul wants the Galatians to be living in Christ alone independently of him or any other leader. His zeal is that they would know and trust Jesus Christ.

Are we kids alright? What idols are we tilting towards, whether old ones or new ones? What's our attitude to our brothers and sisters here, especially those who lead and disciple us? And what's been formed in us by our zeal; where is it being directed - a cause, a church, or a person? May Jesus Christ be our worship, our bond together, our passion and reason for being. Amen.