

Labored over You in Vain

In one of his well-known books entitled, *Mere Christianity*, author and Christian apologist C.S. Lewis gives us some helpful insight into the sin of pride. Lewis writes, “Now what you want to get clear is that pride is *essentially* competitive—is competitive by its very nature—while the other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud about being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest.”

The sin of pride goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve believed that doing things their way was better than obeying God and doing things his way. In our series from Galatians 4:8-11, we’ve seen a group of Christians who’ve turned to Christ, by grace through faith alone. And yet false teachers are trying to convince them that they can and should add something to what Jesus Christ has already perfectly accomplished. Pride is always at the forefront of our minds when we think we know better than God. In our text, Paul goes from talking about their former pagan beliefs in false gods, to the futility of adding any portion of the Old Testament law to their belief in Jesus. “You observe days and months and seasons and years!” (vs. 10) Notice the exclamation point at the end of that sentence. The point that Paul is making has *important significance and he’s making it forcefully*.

In the phrase translated “you observe,” Paul is using a verb form that calls attention to those actions which are ongoing. This didn’t just happen one or two times by mistake. Paul is saying that these Galatian Christians have fallen prey to the false teaching of consistently following the Old Testament calendar and observing the appointed Jewish feasts as one means of contributing to their salvation (Lev. 23). The point is clear. Paul is rightly concerned that these Galatian Christians, who’ve already come to saving faith and to freedom in Jesus Christ, are tempted to add obedience to portions of the Old Testament Law to Christ’s perfect work of salvation. Let’s move on now from Paul’s concern for their *path to bondage* to his:

—Pastoral Concern

“I am *afraid I may have* labored over you in vain.” (vs. 11) Paul’s words here are not to be thought of as exaggeration used for rhetorical effect. He continues to affirm that these Galatians have truly believed in Jesus for salvation. And even though that’s true, there may come a time in any of our lives when the *words and actions* of someone over time may make us concerned as to, whether or not, that person is a genuine Christian

at all. The word translated “afraid” is in the emphatic position of the Greek sentence structure. Paul is placing an emphasis on his *genuine* pastoral concerns. He’s saying that he “*may have*” labored in vain. He’s leaving the door of hope wide open toward these Galatians. Even for genuine Christians, any time we dabble in, or play around with, false teaching it can be harmful to ourselves and others. I can hardly imagine any pastor who’s never experienced these types of fears and concerns.

John Calvin writes of this verse: “To bring back Christianity to Judaism, was in itself no light evil; but far more serious mischief was done, when, in opposition to the grace of Christ, they set up holidays as meritorious performances, and pretended that this mode of worship would propitiate the divine favor. When such doctrines were received, the worship of God was corrupted, the grace of Christ made void, and the freedom of conscience oppressed. Do we wonder why Paul should be afraid that he had labored in vain?”

It’s important to remind ourselves that—even though Christians may be foundationally secure in our belief in Jesus—every day we can fall prey to idol worship. Anytime we put anything or anyone ahead of God and the things that God says in his word as a priority in our lives, we’ve worshiped an idol—if only the idol of self. Puritan David Clarkson (1622-1686) has written these words: “When the mind is most taken up with an object and the heart and affections most set upon it, this is *soul* worship; and this is....the honor due only to the Lord, to have the first, the highest place, both in our minds and hearts and endeavors.” It is the epitome of pride to believe that our ways are better than God’s ways. God and his word must be the priority of our lives!

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