

## Worthless, Elementary Principles of the World

In our previous look at Galatians 4:8-11, Paul reminded the Galatian Christians that they were once enslaved to a belief in false gods, but now they've come to be known by the only true God. Their right relationship with God has come about because God initiated it. He's done everything that's needed for this relationship to be healthy and whole, and yet, sadly, these Christians are tempted to chase after things that are false. Because of this, they run the risk of falling back into bondage. It's only in Christ and doing things God's way that true freedom can be found. How often do we allow our fears to take us back into bondage? We wrongly chase after things that we believe will make us happy—if only for a moment of time—not realizing that, as Christians, we have everything that we could possibly ever need—and more—in Jesus Christ.

I have a book on my shelf at home that I've found very insightful to the American condition in the 21st century even though it was written early in the 19th century. The book is entitled, "Democracy in America," written by a French aristocrat named Alexis de Toqueville, who was initially sent to America by the government of France to write about the prison system in America. But when Toqueville returned home, the book that he would eventually write was much different than was planned at first. It's been said that this book has been quoted by more Presidents, Supreme Court Justices, and Congressmen, than almost any other single book ever published, with the exception of the Bible.

I want to share a couple of quotes to show us the amazing insight of this man as he traveled America for nine months from May 1831 to January 1832. Keep in mind that, even then, America was being touted as the land of plenty and the land where you could truly be all that you wanted to be. And yet, Toqueville noted that in America there was a "strange melancholy that haunts the inhabitants....in the midst of abundance." It was clear to this Frenchman, that Americans—even though they had so much—believed that it was only in having *more* that they could satisfy their incessant craving for personal happiness. He summarized his thoughts on the bankruptcy of this way of thinking with this short phrase, "the incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy [the human] heart."

The reason that this book is still *quoted today* is that *it's still relevant today*. Of course, we understand that those who've not trusted in Jesus Christ by faith, chase after dreams and shadows that promise earthly happiness and freedom from fear. How often do Christians—who should know better—turn from the things of God in order to chase after temporary happiness and freedom from fear and end up back in bondage to those same fears? There are any number of fears that we can struggle with. Fears of not having enough money; fears of being alone; fears of

the life we dreamed of never coming to fruition; fears of how our children will turn out; and on and on it goes. This takes us to verse 9 of our passage where Paul issues a warning to Christians who come under the influence of false teaching:

“But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world whose slaves you want to be once more?” Ancient philosopher Philo of Alexandria said that the Greeks revere the four *elements*—earth, water, air, and fire. The word “elements” is the same Greek word that Paul uses here in verse 9 that’s translated “elementary.” Philo also wrote that there are those who believe the four elements are gods. Each of these *elements* of earth, water, air, and fire, were given the names of Greek gods, Demeter, Poseidon, Hera, and Hephaestus.

We don’t want to miss Paul’s point. Here in verse 9, Paul is using the phrase “elementary principles” to refer to the false “gods” that he’s already mentioned in verse 8 of the passage. He actually refers to them as “worthless.” The word that Paul uses here is a word that can mean “having no substance,” or “destitute and powerless to accomplish an end.” It can also be translated, “beggarly.” Like a beggar that has no resources of his own, these “worthless elementary principles” have no way to help us. Now that these Galatian Christians have “come to be known” by the true God; now that they’ve experienced true freedom in Christ; how could they ever consider turning back to the “worthless elementary principles” of their former pagan life before Christ and want to be enslaved once again? They’re toying with the idea of going *backward* to their former belief in that which is false and worthless rather than going *forward* in their belief in and love for the one true God!

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.