

A Six-Lesson Bible Class on Paul's Letter to the Galatians

Introductory Note from Cliff Barbarick

Thank you for using this curriculum prepared by my students as part of their work in BIBL 320: Introduction to Biblical Interpretation, a class for Bible majors at ACU. Because the students worked on their lesson plans more-or-less independently, you'll notice that each lesson has a slightly different style and voice. Hopefully, the variety adds a liveliness and vibrancy that makes up for the lack of consistency that results from this approach.

Despite the variety of voices in the curriculum, each lesson plan follows a shared template. The largest portion of each lesson plan is the teaching content section. We conceive of this section as notes for the teachers in their own study of Galatians. It's not expected that you read through these notes as you teach the class; instead, you can use them as you see fit for your unique classroom settings. We trust you will be able to choose the material that is most interesting and relevant for your classes.

At the end of each lesson plan, we provide suggested discussion questions and a concrete challenge. Once again, we expect you to adapt these as needed to meet the needs of your class, but we encourage you to find a concrete challenge for your classes. The curriculum assumes that each class session will begin with some time to discuss the concrete challenge from the previous week.

Lastly, we have developed a "breath prayer" for each lesson plan and suggest that you take time near the beginning of each class session to practice the breath prayer together. Breath prayer is a simple but powerful spiritual discipline that Christians have practiced in various forms for centuries. Most prayers are one sentence that has been divided into two parts. A person prays the first part of the prayer silently while inhaling, prays the second part while exhaling, and then repeats the prayer in rhythm with their breath for a set amount of time. Repeating the prayer while focusing on breathing calms a person's mind and helps them meditate on the meaning of the words. For more information on breath prayer, check out the short book, *Pray Like You Breathe*, by Houston Heflin.

We hope our work is a blessing to your class!

Galatians 1:1-24

Following *the way not a way*

Lesson plan by Emma Garza

Main Idea:

Paul is writing to churches that he had established on his first missionary journey in Acts, since then many christians and false preachers have preached to them many false pretenses in the christian church. Specifically circumcision being the way into faith. Paul is telling the Galatians in this portion of the letter to not abandon the gospel they have been taught and to remember Paul's teaching to them.

Weekly breath prayer:

Freedom in Christ;
faith alone

Opening:

- Introduce the spiritual practice of breath prayer.
- One minute of silence to practice the breath prayer for the week.
- How many of us have come into the church building feeling like we were missing something that was expected of us? Preachers say if you don't have things memorized then you aren't a Christian. Feeling pressured by church members to hang crosses in your house or bible verses. Maybe elders are pressuring you to teach your children a certain way or to baptize them early on, saying that this is the only way to faith, and the only way to be a Christian.

Teaching Content:

Galatians 1: 1-2, 10—True Worship: Making God Your Sole God

These verses in Galatians focus on the idea that we as Christ-followers are to be set apart from worldly things and focus on the Lord and worship him solely. That we are here on earth to serve the Lord not ourselves, we strive to please God and not other people. We should not concern ourselves with the judgments of others or the approval of man, as Paul puts it. The letter begins with a clarification that Paul is not sent by man nor from men and by Jesus Christ solely sets up the precedent of the tone for the entire letter. Paul defines a servant of Christ in this portion of the letter as well, saying that because he is a servant of Christ he would never serve anything or anyone other than God alone and encourages us to do the same. In J.D Dunn's *The Epistle to the Galatians* he writes, "Galatians is notable for its strong emphasis on the exclusive worship of God and the rejection of all rival claimants to divine status or allegiance" (Dunn, 1993, p. 5). This is a central idea

that I pulled from for my writing of this lesson plan and something that inspired me, because this is a very important topic to focus on that as we grow up, we tend to forget. Therefore I think it's important to hone in on that with this audience.

Galatians 1:6-9—Follow *The Way Not A Way*

This is an add on to the first lesson, it builds with a similar theme of staying true to the one true gospel and not being sidetracked by other idealizations. Although seemingly attractive and definitely desirable, ultimately they do not have the same substance as the one true God, Jesus Christ. I would talk about the difference between fast food and eating healthy, how although one option seems better, the other is just as good and longer sustaining. Focusing on the aspect of Paul's bafflement with the Galatians leaving the gospel stranded for something of lesser value and cheaper. Like leaving diamonds for costume jewelry. The strong wording towards the end of the passage, emphasizes the point on how severe the situation is and how intense this situation is. Not only does Paul feel betrayed but there is a certain amount of worry in this as well, it's not just, "I cannot believe they are doing this," but I think a worry of God's judgment. In Word Biblical Commentary, R. N. Longenecker says "Paul's overriding concern in Galatians is to maintain the integrity of the gospel of Jesus Christ, against the distortions of those who have come into the Galatian churches preaching another gospel." (Longenecker, 1990, p. 1)

Galatians 1:11-12, 15-16—The Power of the Gospel: Why It Stands Out Above All

In this passage Paul is speaking on how the Gospel is unique from other things that the world may offer us. He says that he did not receive it from man and talks about how God is the one who sets us apart from the world, we should be standing out and standing up for it, as this is what Paul does. He talks about his calling to Christ and how he has shaped his life around the gospel of Christ and pursuing that in other people. This gospel is without any consultation of man but God inspired and God alone. Paul talks a lot about his calling to the life of ministry as a direct message from God, he talks about how God is giving him direct revelation and insight on where his life is to be devoted to, thus proving the gospel is directly driven by God and nothing else. He emphasizes that idea of the gospel being the one true gospel by pointing out his devoted calling saying how God sets people apart. The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Ethics states "Galatians 1:15-16 offers a glimpse of how Paul himself understood his calling to ministry, as a direct revelation from God through his son, Jesus Christ" (Gaventa, 2013, p. 8). Gaventa saying "direct revelation" is exactly showing the point that Paul is trying to make.

Galatians 1:20-24—Total turnaround through JC

This section of Galatians is Paul recalling his life pre-Jesus and how he persecuted Christians and then God turned his life around. He made a complete 180 and is using his personal testimony to show people that it is very possible for even the most "far gone" people to turn to Jesus and live their life glorifying Christ. Our personal testimony of what God has done in us can have massive effects on unbelievers! In Galatians Paul talks about how before he knew God he was persecuted, I

imagine it can be quite awkward to be preaching to people who you've tried to kill but that just displays the grace and power of salvation more so! Paul is teaching us through this section that our own personal testimony can be very impactful and this is an important lesson for this audience. I think we sometimes don't believe that our stories can be helpful because God's grace is shown through our own journeys.

Discussion questions:
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. In what ways has the gospel been perverted to you?2. How have you struggled to understand salvation being faith alone, no works needed?3. What feels "required" to be part of Christianity that Christ says is not?
Concrete challenge:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• As a practical action, reflect on your walk with Christ and eliminate anything that causes you to think this is how we define our faith.
Resources:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Ethics• Word Biblical Commentary

Galatians 2:1-21

Stand Your Ground

Lesson plan by Tre Lewis

Main Idea:
As children of God, there comes a time when we have to come up to those who are viewed as leaders and stand for what the Lord says. How we go about that makes all the difference. Today, we will look at how to best handle conflict in the church.
Weekly breath prayer:
No longer I; but Christ in me.

Opening:

- Share your experience with the concrete application from last week's lesson.
- One minute of silence to practice the breath prayer for the week.

Read Galatians 2:11-14

- What did you notice?

Teaching Content:

In this section we see Paul, who is comparably pretty new to the preaching scene compared to James, John, and Peter. He looked up to the three of them and was even affirmed by them. But after seeing the way they were treating the very people he was called to minister to, he knew he could not sit idly by and not say anything, resulting in the confrontation in Antioch. Paul saw that Peter was trying to draw a line in the traditional place between Jews and non-Jews. Paul believed the only line that mattered was that of Jesus himself. Jesus dealt with sin and redefined righteousness and who is called righteous.¹ Paul felt that Jewish followers needed to have shared meals because Jesus's death broke the power of the idols that trapped them in a life portrayed as what they had to do.

Paul received Peter's retraction from the gentile followers as fear of those who were from the traditional Jewish-followers community. Peter being singled out in v. 14 shows his importance in the church community.

¹ In *Commentaries for Christian Formation* N. T. Wright says, "Any attempt to draw lines in the old place, by keeping separate tables for Jewish Jesus-followers and gentile Jesus-followers, meant turning back the clock to the "present evil age" instead of living boldly in "the age to come," now inaugurated by Jesus' resurrection and gift of the spirit." pg. 109.

Discussion questions:

- How were Peter's actions not in line with the truth of the gospel? What impact did Peter's hypocrisy have on others?
- What do you notice about Paul's recollection of his confrontation with Peter (2:11-14)? Is this conflict between the two apostles surprising to you? Why or why not?
- If you could pick one theme for this passage after your initial reading, what would it be? Why?
- Why do you think that Paul confronted Peter so publicly and directly? What do you think of this approach?

Read Galatians 2:1-10

- What did you notice?

Discussion questions:

- In Galatians 2:1-2, we read that Paul went to meet face to face with the Jerusalem apostles to settle an issue. Why was it essential that he did that? Why was Titus an important test case for the interactions and confrontations he had there (2:3)?
- Who are these "false brothers" (Galatians 2:4-5), and how are they recognized? Who should be on alert to protect the local church from these types of individuals? And what should be the response to the false brothers?
- As Paul goes on to describe his visit to Jerusalem, how does he describe the influence of the Judaizers that he confronted there (2:4-5)? How does Paul describe his ultimate victory in the midst of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem (2:7-10)?
- Paul emphasizes the importance that neither his gospel or apostolic credentials depended on the approval of men, even these influential men. What does that say about Paul? And more importantly, what does that say about the gospel?

Read Galatians 2:15-21

- What did you notice?

Discussion questions:

- In your own words, what does it mean to be justified?
- How are we justified in God's sight? Does that change the law in any way?
- In Galatians 2:20, what does Paul mean that he has been crucified with Christ? Why is this participation so central for Paul?

Concrete challenge:

- Over the next week, look at the people that you surround yourself with. Do they exemplify Christ through their actions? If not, you may need to do a check and see if those people were given to you for a season of life or a lifetime. Maybe the person that is not exemplifying Christ to their fullest potential is you. Perhaps it is time for a heart check and ask God to lead your actions and motivations.

Resources:

- Frank J. Matera, *Galatians*. Sacra Pagina 9. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992.
- N. T. Wright, *Commentaries for Christian Formation: Galatians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021.
- R. Alan Cole, *The Epistles of Paul to the Galatians: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 9. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.

Galatians 3:1-21

Concerns about a Lack of Faith

Lesson plan by Brayden Ashorn

Main Idea:
Paul makes clear in this action that he takes issue with the Galatians following Jewish law when they are not Jewish. However, digging deeper we understand that this is because Paul views it as a lack of faith.
Weekly breath prayer:
Christ is a new curse unto me; Faith in him is all I need

Opening:

- Share your experience with the concrete application from last week's lesson.
- One minute of silence to practice the breath prayer for the week.

Teaching Content:

Paul begins what is considered the third chapter in the Letter to the Galatians, actively referring to the Galatians as being “foolish” and “bewitched” (3:1). Though Paul has yet to mention it specifically as of this point in the letter, we know from his language of “finishing by means of the flesh” (Gal 3:3) and his mention of it later in the letter what it is that has Paul so furious: circumcision. It's something Paul has a history of discussing, being a key member in the debate at Antioch in Acts 15. However, in this specific letter, Paul discusses circumcision as the Galatians' means of “finishing.” It is an interesting choice of language, until one takes into account two factors. Firstly, we know what was the beginning for the Galatians because Paul states it clearly, “...by believing what you have heard,” (Gal 3:2), and “...beginning by means of the Spirit...” (Gal 3:3). The Galatians started by faith and are now trying to “finish” via circumcision. However, what the Galatians fail to acknowledge is the second factor, that this fundamentally contradicts the beliefs of those attempting to sway them into circumcision.² For they believe that to be a part of God's people, one needs to be circumcised, it is the entry-level step.³ Not such is the belief of Paul, who knows that the Galatians joined God's people by faith, and those encouraging circumcision view it not as means of continuing faith, but starting it.⁴ Ultimately, Paul is so concerned with this because he views this obedience to the old law as a lack of faith and trust in God by the Galatians.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 177-178.

³ Schreiner, *Galatians*, 177-178.

⁴ Schreiner, *Galatians*, 177-178.

Paul then begins to discuss how God chose Abraham as the one he would bless the nations through because of Abraham's faith in God. It is important to remember that the Galatians were not originally Jewish, so Paul's recital of the history of Abraham is not the history of the Galatians. However, that makes it all the more impactful that Paul refers to those who have faith as "children of Abraham" (Gal 3:7). For this includes the Galatians, or at least it would if they acted by faith alone; all the more reason Paul is so angry with the Galatians. For if God found favor with Abraham because of his faith, then surely it is faith above all else the Galatians, and all Christians, should strive for. In fact, Paul's theology regarding salvation is completely counteractive to his prior beliefs as a pre-Christian.⁵ For now salvation comes not through Israel's works to please God, akin to a transaction of sorts, but through Israel's faith in God, akin to reciprocation of love in a relationship.⁶ Only now, after the coming of Christ, it is no longer exclusive to those who are literally descendants of Abraham, but to his heirs of faith as well, hence 'All nations will be blessed through you' (Gal 3:8). And again, this is by faith alone, so to bring about a physical justification such as circumcision demonstrates, at least to Paul, a lack of faith.

The next subject Paul touches upon is the law, which Paul adamantly refers to as a curse (Gal 3:10). He then quotes Habakkuk, proclaiming 'the righteous will live by faith' (Gal 3:11), and this is where Paul makes clear that he firmly believes that no person can ever be truly justified by God by attempting to keep true to the law.⁷ Circumcision is a practice rooted in the law, so for Paul, it does nothing to strengthen the relationship between the Galatians and God, if anything it only weakens it. Parallels can be drawn between Paul's language of comparing the law and faith to the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, specifically, 'No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and money' (Matt 6:24). In both instances, one looks to a means other than faith in God as a means of salvation. For Jesus' audience, it is monetary value, and for Paul's audience, it is the works of the law over those of the Spirit.

Paul concludes this portion of the letter by speaking of a promise for the remainder of the section. He initially describes a human covenant, though in our modern language the term "contract" might be more fitting, as Paul specifically describes how such an agreement cannot be violated nor changed once agreed upon (Gal 3:15). This is very important because it is the setup to Paul's grand theological claim: God's promise to Abraham was fulfilled by Christ. This at surface value might not appear like such a bold claim; however, when one takes into account Paul's previous claims of covenants being unchangeable, it reveals that Paul upholds a similar belief held by modern Christians blessed with hindsight, one that may have proven difficult to properly absorb by other believers during the time of Paul. That being that Jesus' arrival on Earth, life in ministry, death, and resurrection were all predetermined. The short lifespan of a single man serves as the means of fulfillment to a promise that proceeds him by generations. Paul then raises a hypothetical question: if Christ is the fulfillment of this promise, why was the law given in the first place (Gal 3:21). Paul's answer actually can be seen in the example of our modern societal laws. Most people would not violate the law, regardless of its enforcement. And yet the government still enacts and enforces

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Exeter: Paternoster, 1982), 153-154.

⁶ Bruce, *Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 153-154.

⁷ Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 143.

laws. Why is that? Because some still would violate it, yet are swayed against it when there are consequences for doing so. In a similar way, Paul proclaims that if the law found in Scripture might keep one from doing that which displeases God, such as injustices and specifically the taking of another life, then surely the law is by nature good (Gal 3:21).

Discussion questions:

- What sort of arguments might have been made in favor of continuing the Law?
- What are your thoughts on Paul describing Christ using the language “curse?”
- Paul draws a lot of comparisons to Abraham in this section. Why might Paul have chosen him instead of other biblical figures?
- What does this section mean for modern Christians?
- Are there any practices or habits we engage in similar to those of the Galatians?

Concrete challenge:

- Paul instructs us to live by faith alone. This week, challenge yourself to live by faith by designating time each day to meditate in silence. Think of it like a mini Sabbath, a time for you to silently reflect on and grow in your relationship with God, ignoring your worries and only concentrating on God. Try designating just 10 minutes a day to live by faith alone.

Resources:

- F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Exeter: Paternoster, 1982.
- Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988.
- Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.

Galatians 3:23-4:20

Paul's Friendship to the Church

Lesson plan by Nadyne Wilson

Main Idea:

The passage is about how the church in Galatia is turning away from God and causing misguidedness among the community. I want to explore the range of emotions Paul is experiencing, from excitement to distress for this community, reflecting on how we can read this and better understand what Paul is doing here. In addition, I will explore all the different ways Paul calls attention to the relationship he shares with this community.

Weekly breath prayer:

I am no longer a Slave;
I am a Child of God

Opening:

- Share your experience with the concrete application from last week's lesson.
- One minute of silence to practice the breath prayer for the week.

Read Galatians 3:23-4:20

- What did you notice?

Teaching Content:

Paul's Travels to the Church of Galatia, and the role it plays in understanding the bond he has. (Specifically in 4:12-16)

To begin, Galatia is one of the first places people believed Paul visited. What is important to note is the idea that Paul previously visited this area and how that plays a role in his writing of this letter. Paul is writing this letter for this community as they have cared for him in his time of need, specifically in his illness. What this does for us readers is understand the bond and make reading this section of the letter different from others. When we read this, we read it as if Paul is angry and writing out of this anger. In this section, we see a different side of Paul, where he expresses concern for the people who were once such great caretakers of him leading to why the letter is so much more impactful in these specific verses. Paul is experiencing not hurt but betrayal from the people who were once so fond of him and who are being diverted away from the person who loves them.

Turning back to “weak and miserable forces” as Paul puts it. (Specifically in 4:8-9)

I want to begin by prefacing this section by stating the vitality of this specific topic and the many ways in which this causes many debates. While there are many ways to view and interpret these verses, this is my take on this topic. From my reading, as I had mentioned, I found that this topic talked about how the Galatia church would be converting back to its old way of life. Paul wanted to write it out in this section to inform them of the consequences of this way of life. For people to fall back into this mode would not do anyone any good and would cause them to do more harm to themselves. The argument has many sides to it and can create different ideas as to what it means, but in the context of how this relates to Paul's relationship, it is a way to show the deep concern that he has for the church and the deep hurt he feels as a result of them dancing with this idea.

Paul and his specific pronoun usage in Galatians and what the effect that this has on the overall letter. (Specifically in 3:23-25)

From what I have read, the tone of this section of the letter expresses an intense need for them to understand where he is coming from. The specific pronoun usage is not new to Paul's letters. Paul's usage of these pronouns is somewhat unique to Galatians in that Paul uses it specifically to show a close relationship with the Galatians. Paul allows the words to speak for himself and show how he is deeply hurt by what they are doing wrong, and the pronouns show that specific feeling. Paul puts himself in the body of the believers he is writing to as a way to emphasize the intense friendship that he has for them. As mentioned, pronouns such as "we and our" are not new to Paul's letters, but in Galatians, it expresses urgency and references to the Galatians and the friendship Paul has for them.

Discussion questions:
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. In what ways are you forgetful of those who share the Gospel with you?2. Do you feel more like Paul (In hurt and despair for the believers who are falling astray)? Do you feel more like The Church of Galatia (reading the leader and examining your actions)?3. What are your ‘weak and miserable forces’? What is drawing you away from Christ?
Concrete challenge:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take note of your “weak and miserable forces.” How can you connect back to Christ, instead of partaking in them some examples include taking a walk with God, reading Bible Verses, or listening to worship music.
Resources:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• J. Louis Martyn, <i>Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary</i>. ABD 33A.

Garden City, NY: Doubleday. 1997.

- Leander E. Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary In Twelve Volumes*. NIB XI. Nashville: Abingdon. 2000.
- L. Ann Jervis, *New International Biblical Commentary: Galatians*. NIBCNT 9. Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson. 1999.

Galatians 4:21–5:12

Slavery and Freedom

Lesson plan by Cliff Barbarick

Main Idea:

- In this section of the letter, Paul outlines a puzzling interpretation of the Sarah and Hagar story in order to affirm that, contrary to what his opponents in Galatia might be teaching, the Galatians are full members of God’s chosen people apart from circumcision. He affirms that Christ has set them free, and this freedom should be used to serve one another through love.

Weekly breath prayer:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free;
Do not submit again to a yoke of slavery

Opening:

- Share your experience with the concrete application from last week’s lesson.
- One minute of silence to practice the breath prayer for the week.

Read Galatians 5:1–6

- What did you notice?

Teaching Content:

Hagar and Sarah

If you are slightly (or significantly) baffled after reading Paul’s allegorical interpretation of the Sarah and Hagar story (based on stories from Genesis 16 and 21), you are not alone. New Testament scholar Frank Matera asserts it is, “without doubt, one of the most puzzling and disturbing passages in the whole of Galatians” (*Galatians*, 172). Paul’s interpretation of the story feels strained and forced—an example of special pleading that might not receive a passing grade on a seminary exegesis paper. At least, it feels this way if we extract it from its literary and historical context. If we can see how it fits in the flow of the letter—and how it responds to Paul’s opponents in Galatia—then we might ease some of our bafflement.

In 4:21–31, Paul establishes two columns that he contrasts with one another. The table below illustrates the columns. Those elements that are implied without being explicitly named are in brackets.

Slave woman	Free woman
Hagar	[Sarah]
Son born of the flesh	Son born through promise
[Ishmael]	Isaac
Covenant from Mount Sinai	[Mount Zion?]
Present Jerusalem	Jerusalem above
Slave children	Children of promise

Interpreters sometimes incorrectly assume that Paul is using this allegory to contrast Judaism with Christianity. But such an assumption ignores the historical context of the letter. In Galatians, Paul is not combatting his fellow Jews; rather, he's trying to rescue the Galatians from Christian teachers who are advocating adherence to the Law. Galatians represents an intra-religious conflict—this is a disagreement within the Christian community between two different gentile missions that think differently about the role of Mosaic Law in faithful living.

Paul reached the Galatians first and converted them to a law-free gospel; others (likely from Jerusalem given the way Paul talks about Jerusalem in Galatians 1–2) have arrived later with a different understanding of how gentiles can join God's chosen people. Frank Matera has offered the following possible summary of their teaching: "The real descendants of Abraham are those who accept the covenant of circumcision that God made with Abraham. You believe in the Christ and that is commendable. But now you must complete your conversation by becoming Abraham's descendants in the line of Isaac, for true Israelites, including the Messiah, belong to this line" (*Galatians*, 175). The biblical narrative supports their logic: Abraham was circumcised as a sign of the covenant with God; his descendants, starting with Isaac and going down through Jesus himself, were circumcised as a sign of their inclusion in God's chosen people. Those who want to be full members of this chosen people, therefore, should embrace these same marks of the covenant between God and his people. It might even be likely that these teachers used the story of Sarah and Hagar to make their case and distinguish between the circumcised descendants who share in the covenant relationship with God and the uncircumcised descendants who remain outside that covenant. How can Paul respond to the force of this logic?

First, he meets them on their turf. The story of Sarah and Hagar would appear to support his opponents' position—and they might have used this story in their teaching—so Paul offers his own interpretation that flips things upside down. These teachers from Jerusalem, with the weight of Jewish Christianity behind them, might be able to claim that "Jerusalem is our mother"; but when they do so, Paul counters, they claim allegiance to the present Jerusalem, which runs back through

Mount Sinai to Ishmael and Hagar. Their children (that is, those they convert to their understanding of the gospel) are actually slaves born according to the flesh. Those who remain faithful to the gospel Paul taught them have the “above Jerusalem” as their mother; they are children of promise who—as gentiles—trace their lineage back to Isaac, Sarah, and Abraham himself.

Given this reinterpretation of the story, what are the Galatians to do? Paul quotes Sarah from Genesis 21:10: “Cast out the slave woman and her son.” It’s a problematic line from Sarah. At the moment she speaks these words, she is not an exemplary model to imitate. She’s both jealous and vindictive, and God protects Hagar and Ishmael from the harm she intends for them. However, we need to remain within Paul’s allegorical interpretation to correctly interpret these words in Galatians. As an act of protection for the community (not an act of vindictive jealousy), he encourages the Galatians to cast out the slave woman (his opponents) and her children (those who have accepted his opponents’ gospel, “which is really no gospel at all”).

Paul’s main concern is not purity (Note: he doesn’t say, “Cast out *the sinner* from your midst”); instead, he’s encouraging them to resist *any* Christian teaching that entices them to rely on anything other than the faithfulness of Jesus to put them in right-relationship with God. Always great is the temptation to take control of our own salvation (see the rich ruler in Luke 18), and Paul exhorts us to recognize and repel this insidious form of slavery whenever it appears

True Freedom

Galatians 5:1–13 brings to a conclusion Paul’s main argument in the letter—the argument against circumcision. After this section, Paul will address the way of life that flows from the Spirit (in contrast to the flesh).

In this section, Paul repeatedly alludes to the teachers who are agitating the Galatians: “Who hindered you from obeying the truth?” (5:7); “the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty” (5:10); and, most dramatically, “I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!” (5:12). He’s alluded to their presence before, but he’s starting to get more specific and direct as he closes the letter (see also 6:12–13). One wonders if these teachers are still in the congregation to hear the letter when it is read to the Galatians. How would having them in the room shift the impact of the letter on the original audience?

It also seems that these teachers might have misrepresented Paul’s position on circumcision. If they had heard that Paul asked Timothy to be circumcised (see Acts 16:1–5), then they might have thought they were actually Paul’s co-workers rather than his opponents. They were teaching the Galatians the message Paul had taught elsewhere, they might have argued; maybe he’d been forced to leave Galatia before he could outline this part of his teaching to them. Paul clarifies in this section that, whatever might have happened with Timothy, he does not preach circumcision for gentiles.

Such teaching, he affirms once more in the letter, would be enticing them back into slavery. One quick note: he exhorts them not to submit *again* to a yoke of slavery. This might be confusing. If the

Galatians were gentiles for whom the Mosaic law was a novelty, how could Paul say that being circumcised was submitting *again* to slavery? With this exhortation, he's making an important connection between their past life and the teaching of his opponents. In the past, as gentiles, they practiced a Roman religion that involved prayers and feasts and sacrifices meant to care for the gods and keep them happy. As a result of these human efforts, the gods would continue to bless rather than curse the families and cities in which they lived. They left that behind in response to Paul's preaching about Jesus and the cross. Now, rather than trusting their own efforts to please the gods, they trust instead in the work that Jesus has already done on the cross. It is *his* faithfulness, not their own, that makes them right with God. They are freed from the enslaving burden of responsibility for their own salvation—that is, unless they *return* to that slavery in a new form. So, even though the Mosaic law is new to them as gentiles, Paul makes the case that submitting to the markers of Israel's covenant with God would be a *return* to the slavery they've only recently left behind.

Instead, Paul affirms, it is “for freedom Christ has set us free” (5:1). As freedom-loving Americans, we resonate with Paul's words, but we must be careful not to misunderstand them. Even though Paul uses the word “freedom,” he may mean something different than we expect. With this word, he does not mean a freedom from constraints that allows us to do whatever we want. That's often what Americans mean when we use the word in political contexts. When we celebrate freedom, we are often celebrating that we are free from constraints and compulsions. We can do as we like (within reason). When someone impinges on that freedom (through, for example, the regulation of firearms), we cry foul and assert our right to freedom. Whatever the value of that idea of freedom, that's not what Paul means when he uses the word. That is not the freedom that Christ has given us. In fact, Paul considers the limitless pursuit of our own desires a kind of bondage to the flesh. Christ has freed us from this kind of bondage. Finally unyoked from slavery to our self-serving efforts, we are free to love one another. As Paul puts it at the beginning of the next section: “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (5:13).

Discussion questions:

- What do you think of Paul's interpretation of the Sarah and Hagar story?
- Paul is concerned about the teaching of other Christians that is drawing the Galatians back into slavery. Can you think of examples of these types of teachings in your own experience with the church? In what ways have we encouraged people to rely on their own efforts rather than trusting in the faithfulness of Jesus to make us right with God?
- How does your definition of “freedom” compare with the one Paul uses in this section of Galatians?

Concrete challenge:

- This week, pay attention to the times when you feel yourself grating against the limitations and constraints that others put on your freedom (e.g., children, spouses, coworkers,

managers). In one of these times, choose to relinquish your freedom in order to serve the other person through love. How does this experience shape your understanding of the freedom that Paul describes in Galatians?

Resources:

- J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians*, Anchor Bible 33a (New York: Doubleday, 1997).
- Frank J. Matera, *Galatians*, Sacra Pagina 9 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992).
- Scot McKnight, *Galatians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

Galatians 5:13–6:18

Growing Fruit

Lesson plan by Cliff Barbarick

Main Idea:

This section of Galatians includes the well-known listing of the fruit of the Spirit. This agricultural metaphor beautifully expresses the intertwining of human effort and God's work in our own spiritual growth. Paul then concludes the letter with a puzzling comment about his own large handwriting that emphasizes his own weakness and dependence on God. In the end, we can boast only in what Christ has done.

Weekly breath prayer:

Since we live by the Spirit;
Let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Opening:

- Share your experience with the concrete application from last week's lesson.
- One minute of silence to practice the breath prayer for the week.

Read Galatians 5:13–18

- What did you notice?

Teaching Content:

How does Fruit Grow?

In his comparison of the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit, Paul uses an agricultural metaphor to describe the work of the Spirit in the lives of those who follow Jesus. This metaphor captures some of the nuance of living the Christian life. Is being loving or patient or kind or faithful something we do by our own effort, or is it God's Spirit that brings about these traits in our lives? Well, Paul might say, does the farmer bring about the harvest by her own effort, or is it God who makes the crops grow? In both cases, the answer is complex and nuanced.

Jesus also regularly used agricultural metaphors in his parables to describe the kingdom of God (and life in that kingdom). Let's look at a few of Jesus's agricultural metaphors, therefore, and ask how they might illuminate our understanding of the fruit of the Spirit.

- What does the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:3–8, 13–20) indicate about how the fruit of the Spirit might grow in our lives?

- This parable affirms both God’s work (the sower casting seed) and our own responsibility for cultivating ourselves to fruitfully receive God’s work in our lives. We can choke growth by fixating on the “cares of the world,” or we can maintain shallow faiths that are too frail to survive hardships. Interestingly, the parable also alludes to another actor—Satan—who works against the growth God intends.
- What does the Parable of the Seed Growing (Mark 4:26–29) add to this understanding?
 - This parable minimizes human agency in producing fruit. The farmer completes the simple task of scattering the seed, but then the earth mysteriously does the rest while the farmer sleeps. Spiritual growth often feels this way. We humbly acknowledge in gratitude that God has brought about his will in our lives seemingly in spite of the various ways we might have stood in his way.
- What does the Parable of the Weeds (Matthew 13:24–30) have to say about cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in our lives?
 - This parable expresses the frustrating intertwining of good and evil in our experience of the world. There will be a time for judgment and purification, but not yet. For the time being—maybe due to our ineptitude for accurately distinguishing good from evil or our inability to address evil without causing broader harm—we adopt a more graceful posture. Do we find the same is true in our own spiritual lives? How often are faithfulness and doubt inseparably intertwined, for example? One day, doubt will be no more; but, at the present time, forcefully attempting to eradicate doubt might do irreparable harm to our faith. We are all a mix of fruit and weeds. Maybe we can gracefully and humbly accept that about ourselves, trusting God to do the needed winnowing at the proper time.
- How might the Parable of the Fig Tree (Luke 13:6–9) speak to the growth of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives?
 - This parable similarly calls for grace and patience. We might not produce fruit on the desired timetable, despite all of our cultivation. So, we keep at it. We keep practicing the spiritual disciplines even when they are imperceptibly slow in their effect. We keep investing in others, even when they disappoint us with their stubborn resistance to change.
- What does the Parable of the Vine (John 15:1–5) tell us about growing the fruit of the Spirit?
 - This parable strongly asserts the source of fruit in our lives: Jesus, the true vine, is the ultimate source of any fruit we bear (see also Gal 2:19–20). We must simply abide in him. As clear as the parable is about the source of the fruit, however, it is frustratingly vague about how we can “abide” in Christ. What does that look like concretely? Does it mean a life of prayer, integration in the church, participation in the sacraments (such as the Lord’s Supper and baptism)? Is it something we do as individuals or only something that we can do as a community? Will we know and feel when we are connected to Christ, or will it be something we recognize after the fact when we see the evidence of fruit in our lives?

Obviously, none of these parables are about the “fruit of the Spirit” (though John 15 is close!), but they help us think through the complexities and nuances of the agricultural metaphor that Paul uses. Paul chooses this metaphor, I think, because of the richness of this complexity. In the end, it all remains somewhat mysterious, and that’s a good thing.

Large Letters

In the last section of the letter, Paul calls attention to the large letters he uses when he writes in his own hand. Most interpreters assume that at this point Paul has taken the pen from his scribe (to whom he has been dictating the letter to that point) and he writes the last few sentences himself. This was not an uncommon practice in the ancient world. A letter writer would depend on a trained scribe for most of the composition and then add a handwritten note near the end to confirm the source and authenticity of the letter. Interpreters disagree, however, when explaining why Paul writes in large letters.

Some contend that the large letters express Paul’s frustration and anger. It’s like writing a text message in all capital letters. Pay attention! I’m serious about this! And I’m not too happy with you!

Others have wondered if Paul writes in large letters because he lacks skill as a scribe. In our world, the ability to read and write is the foundation of an education. We learn these rudimentary skills within our first few years of school, and then we build our education on that foundation. In the ancient world, on the other hand, a person could be highly educated without being able to read and write printed text. In an oral culture, those skills were not necessary for education. They were the domain of specialists (like scribes) rather than the basic building blocks for all educated people. A present-day analogy would be the ability to write computer programming code. Specialists can learn this skill, but it’s not required to be considered highly educated in our society. However, as we move into an increasingly digital culture, can we imagine a time in the not-too-distant future when every educated person will be expected to know basic computer programming? Will people marvel that we received advanced degrees without ever learning this “basic” skill? It could be, therefore, that Paul’s handwriting is like a child’s; he writes in large letters because he doesn’t have the scribal proficiency to write in tight, neat script.

Another option might be that Paul writes in large letters because he has poor eyesight. He alludes to a possible ailment with his eyes in Galatians 4:13–15, and that could explain his noticeably large handwriting.

Given what he says in the rest of the letter, I think the last two options make better sense. Paul has certainly been angry at various points in the letter, but I don’t think he wants to end the letter on an angry note. In this final section, he contrasts his boastful opponents with his own more humble presence. While they might appeal to the flesh to boost their credentials, Paul asserts that he refuses to boast in anything except the cross of Jesus Christ (6:14). Some might be embarrassed by large handwriting that displays some sort of feebleness (poor eyesight, an unstable hand, or rudimentary scribal skills), but Paul calls attention to it. As Paul tells the Corinthians, who were also enamored

with impressive “super-apostles”: “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9–10).

Discussion questions:

- What is the interrelationship among the fruit of the Spirit? For example, how is peace related to patience or faithfulness to gentleness? Why do you think Paul’s list begins with love? Why does he end the list with self-control?
- What kind of things are we tempted to boast about?
- Have you ever tried to hide something about yourself that embarrassed you? What were you worried people would think of you? What happened to those relationships when you “came clean”? In what ways does that vulnerable authenticity proclaim the gospel?

Concrete challenge:

- Find a close confidante this week (a spouse or a good friend) and share fears about your own inadequacies. What worries feed your own “imposter syndrome”? Share those and see what happens.

Resources:

- J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians*, Anchor Bible 33a (New York: Doubleday, 1997).
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- Scot McKnight, *Galatians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).