

Galatians 4:8-11

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/gal/gal-4/galatians-48-11/>

Before believing in Christ, the Galatians were slaves to sin and tried to please false gods. But now that they are in right relationship with the true God, they're still choosing to live in slavery to rules and rituals. Paul worries that he wasted his time teaching them.

Paul refers to the time before the Galatian Gentiles knew God, when they were *slaves* to the *elemental things of the world*. Different from Jews, the Galatians were *slaves to pagan gods*. Paul makes it clear that these pagan gods were, in actuality, *by nature* not really *gods*. However, these pagan *gods* did have rules for how to get blessings, how to prosper in the world. These religious rules included observing various *days and months and seasons and years*. Many of our current Christian holidays (an abbreviation of holy days) are Christian substitutes for pagan holidays.

When Christianity became the official religion of Rome, Christian leaders faced the challenge of offering constructive alternatives to the old holidays of pagan converts. So they were very creative. They substituted “Easter” for the “Feast of Ishtar.” They now celebrated the resurrection of Jesus instead of celebrating the fertility goddess Ishtar. Ishtar worship included superstitions regarding Spring and crop productivity, as well as gross immorality.

But here Paul is not referring to times of remembrance for what Jesus did for us. Rather, he is referring to rituals that are likely supposed to gain us something we desire. In this case, Paul is saying something quite critical of the Jews. He apparently is saying that the way they are approaching their Jewish *days and months and seasons and years* is fundamentally no different than what the Galatians did in paganism. These pagan rituals falsely promised their participants that they could get “the gods” to bless them in exchange for their participation.

In chapter 2, Paul criticized the Galatians for “*seeking to be justified*” in the sight of God when they have already been justified. In Gal 5:4, Paul will say that those who seek to be justified by the Law make Christ unnecessary or ineffective. If we are already righteous in God’s sight, all that remains is to live out that righteousness in this world. Paul asserts that there is no need to seek something we already possess.

But that is exactly what the competing Jewish “authorities” have gotten the Galatians to begin doing. And Paul tells them this is like going back under the *elemental things of the world*. Instead of living out the righteousness of Christ through a walk of faith, they are following *days and months and seasons and years*, seeking to be justified before God.

Paul presents a completely different paradigm. Rather than seeking to perform for or manipulate God, Paul presents that we should live like a *son* in God’s Kingdom. God desires that all who believe in His Son and possess His Spirit take on the responsibility of managing His business here on earth. The Galatians are leaving the high and lofty calling of being sons in God’s Kingdom to once again live as slaves and children.

Paul says he *fears for* them. He is concerned that he has *labored over them in vain*. Paul is adamant that the Galatians should not seek to be justified through following rules or rites when they have already been justified by faith. Paul has sought to lead the Galatian believers to maturity in Christ. But if they are going to spend their time seeking to be justified (2:17, 5:4) then Paul is wasting his time. His work on their behalf is *in vain*. Seeking to be justified by following rules prevents growth in Christ. Paul tells his disciple Timothy to spend his time on “faithful men” who will also disciple others. “Don’t spend time on people who aren’t faithful, that isn’t a good investment of time” is Paul’s point (2 Tim 2:2). Paul’s comment about *laboring in vain* is a similar statement.

Biblical Text

8 However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. 9 But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? 10 You observe days and months and seasons and years. 11 I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.