

Passionate About Others' Spiritual Health
Galatians 4:8-20

Mr. Holland's Opus is a story about a high school music teacher. Mr. Holland didn't really want to be a high school music teacher; he wanted to be a great composer. His plan (at age 30) was to teach high school music for a few years just to pay the bills, but on the side he would work on his opus (his masterpiece). He fully expected that his fame and lasting legacy would be this opus.

But things didn't turn out as Mr. Holland had planned. Due to a variety of factors, he found himself trapped in his position as a high school music teacher. His home life was rather difficult, but he invested deeply in the lives of his students. He called them to a higher standard of musical excellence than most people thought possible. All the while, Mr. Holland kept working on his opus.

At the age of 60, after teaching for 30 years, it became obvious that Mr. Holland would never finish his masterpiece, much less experience the satisfaction of having it performed. Adding insult to injury, Mr. Holland was forced into early retirement. On his last day at the school, his wife and his grown son help him pack up his office. As they walk down the halls on their way to the parking lot, they hear music coming from the auditorium. There he finds an auditorium full of people and on the stage an orchestra composed of former students. They had been practicing the opus that Mr. Holland had been composing for over three decades (but never finished).

Before Mr. Holland was invited to conduct the assembled orchestra, it was pointed out that his "opus" – his masterpiece – wasn't the music. His opus was that body of students he had influenced along the way – all young men and women whose lives were enriched by their relationship with him.

Something similar will probably be true in your life. Your lasting legacy and the thing for which you'll be remembered probably isn't going to be some amazing accomplishment in your career or some history-changing invention. Your opus will probably be the people whom you've influenced. Unlike Mr. Holland, we need to understand this *as* we live our lives. If we do, we'll see our investment in other people as the "main thing" we're called to do instead of a distraction. This is especially true for us as followers of Jesus Christ.

Today as we continue our study in Galatians we are going to consider a passage in which Paul describes how zealous/passionate he is for the Galatians' spiritual health. Paul understood that his main contribution in this life would be the churches he established in cities across the Roman Empire.

We are going to take Galatians 4:8-20 as a case study of how deeply we should *care about* the spiritual health of others and therefore how deeply we should *invest* in others. As we go through this passage, consider how you might have this same zeal for at least one other person. For some of you, this will be a brand new idea for you; if so, just give it a chance as we go through this passage. Others of you will think of someone in your family – a spouse, a child, a brother or sister. It could be a friend, someone in your life group, or simply someone else that God has brought into your life.

A Case Study: Paul's passion for the Galatians' spiritual health (Galatians 4:8-20) Since we've already spent quite a bit of time in this sermon series discussing the dangers of the Galatians going back to the Law, I won't spend much time describing these dynamics again. I'll emphasize Paul's passion for the Galatians' spiritual health. In verses 8 through 11 Paul lays out his fears about the Galatians. Paul describes the Galatians' life before Christ in verse 8.

8 However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods.

Before they came to know the one, true, living God, they weren't free to do whatever they wanted. They were actually enslaved to the false gods they worshiped. But, as Paul explained elsewhere (such as 1 Corinthians 8:4), there is no God but one; therefore the Galatians were enslaved to "so-called gods that do not even exist" (NLT). Notice the contrast in verse 9:

9 But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God . . .

When the Bible speaks of knowing God, it is speaking of more than mastering a set of facts about God. It is speaking about personal, relational knowledge. Paul describes the Galatians' conversion when he says, "But now that you have come to know God. . ." But he quickly qualifies himself by saying that more importantly, they have come "to ***be known*** by God." In his book, *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer points out that the believer's knowledge of God is "the consequence of God taking knowledge of them" (p. 36). Packer went on to say:

What matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it – the fact that *He knows me*. I am graven on the palms of His hands. I am never out of His mind. All my knowledge of Him depends on His sustained initiative in knowing me. I know Him, because He first knew me, and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when His eye is off me, or His attention distracted from me and no moment, therefore, when His care falters. (p. 37)

Notice how incredulous Paul is that the Galatians would have such little regard for the experience of knowing God and being known by Him for

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.

Paul is saying something rather devastating about the prospect of living under the Law (observing holy days, festivals, etc.). First, the regulations of the Law are so elemental that he calls them "weak and worthless elemental things"; they have no power to change the human heart. And second, returning to the Law is tantamount to being "enslaved all over again."

11 I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.

Paul wasn't content merely being able to say, "I've done my part. If you're not going to do your part, that's your problem." No, Paul actually cared about the spiritual health of people. He was concerned about lasting fruit in the lives of the Galatians. Verses 12 through 20 show how passionately Paul wanted them to walk with Christ. *Is there anybody else* whose spiritual health you're that passionate about? The first three verses refer back to a previous time when the Galatians received Paul's ministry with great eagerness.

12 I beg of you, brethren, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. . . .

When Paul originally came to the Galatians, he became one of them; he entered their community and spoke on their level. Now Paul begs the Galatians to "become" as he is – as someone who enjoyed freedom from the Law. It's hard to say exactly what Paul was referring to when he wrote (at the end of verse 12):

12 . . . You have done me no wrong; 13 but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; 14 and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself.

Apparently Paul had some sort of terrible physical condition that might have been an excuse for the Galatians to "despise or loathe" him. People are naturally drawn to attractive, strong people – something that Paul *wasn't* when he arrived in Galatia. And yet they received him "as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself." They couldn't have been more receptive to Paul and his message. In verse 15 Paul refers to the "sense of blessing" they had toward Paul; they considered themselves blessed because of his influence in their lives.

15 Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness, that if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. 16 Have I therefore become your enemy by telling you the truth?

"You would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me" is Paul's way of saying that they would have done anything for him. But now – because he had spoken the truth to them – now they were going to treat him an enemy?!? If you've ever invested deeply in someone and they get to the point where they view you with suspicion, you know how Paul felt. He exposes the motives of the Judaizers (the Jews from Jerusalem who were trying to influence the Galatians) in verses 17 and 18.

17 They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out, in order that you may seek them. 18 But it is good always to be eagerly sought in a commendable manner, and not only when I am present with you.

The meaning of verse 17 is debated, but I think Paul is saying that these Jewish Christians who wanted the Galatians to keep the Law were zealous, but their zeal was misguided. If they succeeded in influencing the Galatians, they would effectively "alienate" (NIV) or "shut out" the Galatians from Paul and the rest of the body of Christ. The Judaizers wanted the Galatians to be exclusively devoted to them.

Such exclusivism should be a “red flag” in our day as well. Sometimes you’ll come across a church or a movement or a teacher who basically says, “Cut all ties with everybody else; we have everything you need.” That type of control is never good. That apparently is what Paul warned the Galatians against.

In verse 19 Paul expresses *his* desire for the Galatians (in contrast with the desire of the Judaizers). Paul mixes metaphors here, but his point is pretty clear.

19 My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you-- 20 but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

Paul calls the Galatians “my children” because he had led them to Christ. Paul thinks of himself as a woman in childbirth, in labor on behalf of her children. In his case, he labored until “Christ [was] formed in [them].” His ultimate ambition was for the character of Jesus Himself to be formed within the Galatian believers. Paul wanted a deep spiritual transformation to take place to the degree that they became like Christ in thought, word, and deed. Paul had a burning desire – a passion – for the spiritual health of the Galatians.

By way of application, I want us to consider, *How is God calling us to be passionate about the spiritual health of others?* How can we take our cues from Paul in this way? Just to put your mind at ease, this isn’t a one-size-fits-all issue. This will look different for you than it looks for me. It will depend on your relationship with the other person, your spiritual gifting, your spiritual maturity, your availability, and a whole host of other things. But can you identify at least one other person whose spiritual health you might be passionate about? Is there at least one other person about whom you might care that deeply?

You might be thinking, “I have no business having spiritual ambitions for others until I get myself straightened out spiritually.” Well, I agree that you don’t want to be hypocritical by wanting something for others that you don’t want for yourself. But many times the two go hand in hand.

Children. For example, those of you who are parents should be passionate about the spiritual health of your children. As parents we are called to give our children every opportunity to know and love God. But that will never happen unless we want the same thing for ourselves.

Our children’s ministry is really geared toward helping parents be passionate about the spiritual health of their children. We use a curriculum called “Orange.” Chris Barker and I went to the Orange Conference in Atlanta a couple of weeks ago; that was one revved-up group of people. The Orange Strategy is this: The church is yellow, representing light; the family is red, representing the heart. When the church and the family partner together (mixing yellow and red), you get orange. That partnership has the potential of greater spiritual fruit than either the church or the family could have on its own. This only works if the parents are passionate about the spiritual development of their kids.

One of the things Chris provides each week is a resource that the parents can use to reinforce and deepen what their kids are learning on Sunday mornings. For example, in April, the elementary-aged students learned about humility on Sunday mornings. The basic idea was that just as Jesus put others first we should put others first. The “family links” Chris sent out gave Scriptures and activities parents can do with their children; the goal is to actually cultivate humility in their lives, putting others first in specific ways. The point isn’t for you merely to tell your kids to be humble; the point is for you to share with them how you’re pursuing humility (how hard it is, when you fail, when you succeed). If you are passionately pursuing humility, it will be natural to want that for your children. If it’s just an idea you’re trying to get across, well, I doubt it’ll be that powerful.

I remember when our kids were younger that they would usually glaze over when I tried to teach the Scriptures in an abstract way. But when we talked about real-life situations I was struggling through, they were “locked in.” (Some of you have provided me with some pretty good material!) Parents, if we’re passionate about our spiritual health, it’s very natural to have the same attitude toward our children.

Life Groups. Here at Faith the primary structure we provide for relationships is Life Groups. Life groups are smaller gatherings in which you can develop relationships and “do life” together. It may well be that God wants you to be passionate about the spiritual health of someone you meet in your life group. Sometimes God will put someone on your heart. He will lead you to pray for them, to talk with them, to hang out with them. We’ve seen God use such relationships in some powerful ways.

These are just some suggestions. I guess I want to encourage you to dream and trust God when it comes being passionate about the spiritual health of others. As I said earlier, this may be a brand new thing for you. Or it may have been a really long time since you seriously entertained the possibility of being used by God in someone else’s life. Whatever your level of spiritual maturity and whatever your stage of life, never underestimate how God can use you in the lives of those you care deeply about.

I think about the people who befriended me when I was in college and not walking with God: Bob Bowen and Joel Piper. I remember those who mentored me early on in my walk with God: Mike Metzger, Greg St. Cyr, Merwin Peak, Dave Busskol, Dave Simmons. They had a variety of different gifts; they related to me in a variety of different ways. But God used them in my life in a powerful way. They let me into their lives. They let me see what the faith is all about. They honestly cared about me; I wasn’t a project to them. And I’ll be forever grateful. Each of them is partially responsible for any spiritual fruit I’ve produced. When I think of their influence in my life, it reminds me that God wants to use me in the lives of others.

How is God calling us to be passionate about the spiritual health of others?

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