

‘Joy stealers.’ (11)

We’re continuing our sermon series through the **Book of Galatians** but before we get into our text today let me share with you a story I heard the other week.

Children were lined up in the cafeteria of a Christian school for lunch. At the head of the table was a large pile of apples. Someone had written a note and placed it next to the apples. It read, ‘**Take only one, God is watching.**’ Moving through the line, to the other end of the table, was a large pile of chocolate biscuits. One little boy wrote his own note and snuck it next to the cookies, ‘**Take all you want, God is watching the apples.**’

We all have our own ideas of what God is like, what He does and what He sees. And in the world today there are many so called gods in whom people worship and put their trust in on a daily basis. The apostle Paul is going to deal with a topic which is still very relevant today and that’s the topic of imaginary gods.

Galatians 4:8+9 “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?”

You see, there was a time when the Gentiles of Galatia served those gods that they had created in their own minds, gods they had used their imagination to invent. And Paul says in the past, they didn’t know the true God of heaven. He says in the past they were foolish because they bowed down to worship idols and were scared of all the superstitions which came about because of these imaginary spirits. And this wasn’t a new problem, even God’s own people fell for imaginary gods.

When the prophet Jeremiah is speaking on behalf of God to His people, God is targeting the religious leaders and reminds them just how stupid this is. He says in **Jeremiah 2:26-28 “They say to wood, ‘You are my father,’ and to stone, ‘You gave me birth.’ They have turned their backs to me and not their faces; yet when they are in trouble, they say, ‘Come and save us!’ Where then are the gods you made for yourselves? Let them come if they can save you when you are in trouble! For you, Judah, have as many gods as you have towns.”**

You see loved ones the beauty of Christianity is that we can become educated enough to know the difference between the One true God and any imaginary gods. We should know the difference between superstition and the One true God. Now the good news is that the Galatians had obeyed the Gospel and become sons of God. In other words, they came to realise just how stupid they were and turned to the One true God. And because they turned to God, God claimed them as His sons through the redeeming blood of Jesus.

Now for the life of me I can’t understand why many people who saw the foolishness of their former religious beliefs. Those people who left foolishness, turned to God but then decide they want to go back to foolishness. Paul asks them, **how could you give up the freedom that you now enjoy in Christ in order to return to a legal system that brought you bondage and condemnation? Why would you want to go back to your imaginary gods?**

You see, the Jewish Christians were in the process of returning to the legalism of meritorious law-keeping in reference to circumcision and Old Testament ceremonies. The Judaizing teachers were taking both Jewish and Gentile Christians on a journey back to those, ‘**weak and miserable forces**’ of religion that produced death, not life. In other words, they were returning to ‘**another Gospel,**’ a gospel that brought death because it denied the sufficiency of grace. The Judaizing teachers were inviting the Galatians to return to religions of slavery and death.

Loved ones there are many religions out there who claim they can take you a higher level of spiritually. There are many religions out there who claim they can get you to be more in touch with your spiritual side. ‘**Come and worship with us**’ they say, ‘**and you’ll experience real spirituality in our worship!**’ ‘**Come along and witness people being healed, we’ll give you the gifts on tongues!**’ ‘**Feel and see the spirit move among us as he demonstrates his power and displays his wonders.**’

I was watching a documentary the other week about so called faith healers and despite the fact they have been shown to be frauds, thousands of people still follow them, **why?** Because people won’t accept that there are ‘**weak and miserable forces**’ at work. And instead of living by faith, people want to live by experience, by emotions and feelings. Paul says in **2 Corinthians 5:7 “For we live by faith, not by sight.”**

Loved ones we need to be on our guard against anyone who offers a so called ‘**higher**’ spiritual experience.

As a Christian you're 'in Christ' and you can't be any more spiritually connected than being in Christ. And Paul says to these Galatian Christians, if you guys go back to Judaism, you're starting a journey which will lead you back to slavery and death. You go back to the old routines of pointless religious activities.

Galatians 4:10+11 "You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you."

The Galatians were being instructed to observe Jewish feast days as legal requirements for justification. Now remember even though Paul never condemned the keeping of certain days that were observed in a cultural situation. For example, in **Colossians 2:16** he wrote, "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day." But Paul did condemn the keeping of those days as a way of working for your salvation.

And so, after teaching them the Gospel, helping them see the foolishness of their former religion, highlighting that law keeping alone doesn't make anyone right with God. Paul feels like he's just wasted his time with them. **Have you ever felt like that?** Where you've shared the Gospel with someone, they became a Christian but later fell away. You feel like you've wasted your time, **don't you?**

Well, that's not what Paul means here, it's never a waste of time bringing people to Christ. He's talking in terms of the great sufferings and trials he and Barnabas went through in the southern region of Galatia to bring them the Gospel. Paul's saying that all that persecution and effort was useless if they return to a system of legal justification.

Imagine someone setting you free from slavery and bondage only to find out that they want to go back to it! Paul's basically saying they should hang their heads in shame even at the thought of going back. Now most people would simply give up and leave them to it and sometimes that happens within the church when someone leaves, there's no follow up and we leave them to it. But Paul, he wasn't to give up on them that easily.

Galatians 4:12-14 "I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you. You did me no wrong. As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself."

Paul pleads with them to leave this idea of going back to try and be right with God by law-keeping and good deeds. Now if you think this doesn't seem all that bad, we have to understand what they were considering doing. Their actions weren't just a simple deviation from the truth of the Gospel. Their actions meant they would lose their relationship with God and couldn't be called children of God anymore and ultimately, they would lose their salvation.

And to get his point across to the Galatians Paul makes it personal and says if you go back you'll not only lose your relationship with God but you'll also lose the relationship you had with him. Paul had become all things to all men in order to win the Galatians. He had identified with them in order to cross-culturally communicate the Gospel to them. But he's pleading that they become as he is by enjoying the freedom that he has in Christ.

Now whilst in Galatia they did Paul no harm, but graciously received him as a messenger of God. He suffered great persecution and hardship in order to evangelise the areas of Galatia in doing so he became ill. And so, the superstitious converts in Galatia would have considered either persecution or illness to be a curse that the gods would pour out on those who were wrong. However, those who accepted what Paul preached didn't receive him as one who was cursed. They didn't consider Paul's hardships or sickness as a curse from some false god.

Now we don't know what this illness was which Paul was suffering from but we do know it hindered his work in Galatia. Paul's simply saying, despite being ill, they received him anyway. The Galatians enthusiastically received Paul when he preached the Gospel to them. They received Paul as one sent from God, not from men.

Remember on one occasion the Galatians actually believed that Paul and Barnabas were the gods who had come down from heaven to visit them according to **Acts 14:11+12**. And so, if they could easily believe they were gods, this would explain why they would be so open to the legalistic teaching of the Judaizers.

And nothing has changed, even people today will believe almost anything, **won't they?**

I remember conducting a Bible study one evening about giving and a brother came up with the idea that our offering money should only be used to help other Christians. Well as I sat there amazed at his reasoning, I was even more amazed at how quickly some of our brethren jumped on board with his idea and agreed with him, without even studying the topic properly or even speaking to other mature Christians about this doctrine.

Loved ones we're so vulnerable to latest teaching or a teaching that we've never heard before. And instead of going away and studying the subject in depth for ourselves or speaking to more mature Christians about it, we simply just go with it. Then we will no longer be infants, and be led astray by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. This is what the Galatians were like, they were like **'infants, being tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching'** as **Ephesians 4:14** tells us.

And Paul wants to get to the bottom of it, he wants to know what's happened, that's changed their opinion of what Paul taught them. And so, he carries on and says in **Galatians 4:15+16** **"Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?"**

When Paul first came to them with the Gospel, they felt greatly honoured and regarded him highly. They would have made great personal and physical sacrifices in order to help him. And as a result of their reception of Paul and his message, they also received a great blessing of joy, they were blessed by his presence.

But now, their joy has subsided which is something I've experienced at first hand. Because that's what legalism does to religion, it sucks the joy right out of it. In legalistic religions, joy lasts as long as you're prepared to keep the laws and do good works in order to be saved. And once you realise that you can't keep up with any of the latest manmade laws, the joy quickly fades away.

But when you're a Christian, who relies totally on the grace of God, you realise that your joy is constant because you recognise you're relying on the blood of Jesus for your salvation. Our joy isn't based on what we have to do for our salvation, our joy is based on what has been done by Jesus to offer us salvation. After all, if we have to rely on our own merits for salvation, **who gets to decide how much is enough?**

Now Paul continues to say something to the Galatians which I believe we really struggle to say to others today. Now what I mean by that is that we're sometimes afraid to talk to people, especially our close friend about Jesus just in case it costs us our friendship with them. But loved ones, if you treasure their friendship that much, **wouldn't you want to spend the rest of that friendship in heaven?**

Being friends with someone won't help them get to heaven, but being friends enough to care about their soul, to tell them about Jesus will help them. Paul gets straight to the point with the Galatians by asking if he has **'become their enemy for telling them the truth'**. He feels that he must say the truth, even though that truth might cause great resentment against him personally. He's willing to take the risk of losing their friendship in order that they not lose their relationship with God as children of God.

And loved ones we should have the same attitude when it comes to our friends, especially our non-Christian friends. **Do we care enough to tell our friends that the baptism they had when they were a child won't save them? Do we care enough to tell our Pentecostal friends that the faith healing and tongue speaking they are experiencing isn't real? Do we care enough to tell our family members who aren't Christians that unless they obey the Gospel they can't be saved? Are we willing to risk losing our friendships with people because of the truth?**

Or as Paul would ask in **Romans 10:14** **"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"**

Loved ones let me ask you, **do you believe in heaven and hell? Do you believe they are real places?** If you answered yes to that question, then ask yourself the same question I have to ask myself time and time again, **why won't we speak to our friends about it more openly?**

A Christian man before his mum passed away had never really spoken to her about Jesus and so one day just before she died, he decided to do just that. Now he was afraid that she might think that he was some kind of **'Bible Basher'** or some kind of **'radicalistic'**, but he loved her and he knew he had to give her at least the choice to reject Jesus.

And despite her wanting the churches prayers but not wanting Jesus, He felt a peace of mind in knowing that he gave her at the very least, the option of Jesus, like someone did with them many years ago. **Don't people deserve the right to at least reject Jesus once?**

Now the thing about legalists is that they are always accusing other brethren of something, usually of being too liberal, a heretic or a false teacher. And we can imagine them saying **'oh Paul is making salvation far too easy, we have to do something to work towards our salvation.'** **'What we have to do is mix Christianity with Judaism, we'll believe in Christ but make sure we'll keep the Old covenant of circumcision and observe our special days'.** In other words, they wanted to turn the Galatian church against Paul and would say anything and accuse him of everything to help them do just that. But Paul is very much aware of what's going on, he knows exactly who's behind them wanting to turn back to those **'weak and miserable forces'**.

Galatians 4:17+18 **"Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them. It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you."**

These legalistic teachers were saying, **'let's go out and save the saved'**, and **'let's convert these Christians to our way of religion.'** You see the legalist's focus is never on Jesus but always on self. And so, they go about trying to intimidate others to conform to their own rules, regulations, opinions and interpretations. **But can you see the difference?** The legalist recruit people but God coverts people. The legalists hold up a bunch of rules and regulations but Christians by faith hold up the cross.

The Judaizing teachers wanted to influence the Galatians in order to have them in fellowship with their position. But in doing so, Paul says, the Galatians would lose their fellowship with the church. And instead of having a zeal for Christ, you would end up with a zeal for them. Which basically means the legalists will demand that you agree with them in all opinions and interpretations, which also means there's no room for freedom. **What's the point in studying the Bible, if these people have already got it all worked out? What's the point of a Bible class if these guys have all the answers anyway?**

Now zeal is a good thing as long as it's controlled and guided by knowledge as **Romans 10:2** tells us. In other words, we shouldn't be deceived into thinking that the zeal of any religious group proves the truth of the group. We often look at those people who go around knocking on people's doors almost every day and think they are zealous for the Lord. But loved ones, zeal doesn't guarantee that they're teaching the truth, it only confirms that the zealous firmly believe what they teach. And Paul says to the Galatians Christians, **'don't be deceived into thinking that the zeal of the Judaizing teachers is evidence of truth'**. People are often deceived by the zeal or by the great enthusiasm of those who are promoting their own theologies.

Galatians 4:19+20 **"My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!"** Now notice what Paul says here, Paul has moved in this letter from calling them **'foolish Galatians'** in **Galatians 3:1**, to **'brothers and sisters'** in **Galatians 4:12**, and now he says, **'my dear children'**.

Paul's harshness has moved to gentleness in a last emotional plea that they wake up to what is happening. He says just like the pain experienced in a woman going through childbirth, he's experiencing the frustrations of building a church. In other words, his first efforts in Galatia were strenuous as a woman in labour, he was going through the same pain in order to help them remain children of God.

They had come into Christ by being immersed into Christ but sadly they hadn't grown in the grace and knowledge of Christ in order that Christ be formed in them. And he says, if he were only personally present with them, he could nurture their spiritual growth and personally deal with the Judaizing teachers among them. But he isn't there personally with them, he's **'perplexed'** which basically means he's at a loss as to what to think about them.

Loved ones, may we be alert to any legalising joy stealers who come our way and may God give us the boldness to stand up against them. May He give us the boldness and the love to tell our friends, whoever they are, whatever they believe, the truth about Jesus and His church.