

The Book of Galatians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: Do Not Turn Back to Bondage

Galatians 4:8–20

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

In this passage Paul shifts from sustained argument to heartfelt pastoral appeal, but the doctrinal stakes remain high. He warns the Galatians against turning back to bondage, treating their drift toward law-observance as a return to the same slavery they knew under idolatry. The lesson teaches the real danger of regression in the Christian life, the futility of seeking standing with God through religious calendar-keeping, and the goal toward which all genuine ministry aims, namely Christ formed in the believer. Paul's fear that he may have labored in vain underscores that falling away is a real possibility, not an impossible one.

The teacher should handle the matter of observing days and seasons with care, especially for our heritage. Paul is rebuking a return to the old covenant ceremonial calendar, and to ritual observance in general, as a means of justification, which is bondage. He is not condemning the new covenant practice of gathering on the first day of the week, which is the apostolic pattern of worship freely offered, not a Sabbath obligation imposed for righteousness. Help students distinguish bondage to ritual from the freedom of new covenant worship, so they neither return to legalistic calendar-keeping nor despise the Lord's Day assembly God's people are taught to keep.

Pastorally, this is one of the warmest chapters in the letter, and it models what shepherding looks like. Aim to stir in students a love for those who tell them the truth, a discernment about flattering influences that serve themselves, and above all a longing for the true goal of the Christian life. Help them see that the point of it all is not merely more knowledge or better behavior but Christ himself formed within them, and call them to press forward toward that rather than drifting back.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul marvels that, "now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God," the Galatians would "turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world" (4:9). What does it mean to be known by God, and why does Paul treat turning back to bondage as such a tragedy?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul frames the Galatians' situation with a stunning phrase. They have come to know God, but he corrects himself to say something even better: they have come "to be known by God." Our

knowing of God always rests on his prior knowing of us. He set his love on us, sought us, and claimed us before we ever turned to him. To be known by God is to be loved, chosen, and held by him.

Against that backdrop, the tragedy of turning back becomes clear. Paul calls the things they are drifting toward “weak and worthless elementary principles.” After tasting a real relationship with the living God who knows them, to go back to slavery is like a freed prisoner asking for his chains, or an adopted child crawling back to the orphanage. It is not merely a mistake; it is a heartbreak.

Teach the seriousness this implies. The Christian life is not a one-way escalator that carries us safely upward regardless of what we do. Paul plainly fears that these believers could turn back and be enslaved again. Knowing and being known by God is a relationship that can be abandoned, which is why Scripture so often warns us not to turn away (Hebrews 3:12–14).

Yet end with the comfort hidden in the phrase. The thing that keeps us is not the strength of our grip on God but the security of his grip on us, his knowing of us. The call is not to anxious striving but to remain in the love of the One who knew us first.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Being known by God as the ground of our knowing him
- God’s prior love, choice, and claim upon his people
- The real possibility of turning back and being enslaved again (Hebrews 3:12–14)
- Security found in God’s grip on us rather than ours on him

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to you to be known by God, not just to know about him?
- Why is turning back to bondage a heartbreak and not just a mistake?
- How does being known by God steady you without making you careless?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul warns against returning to the very slavery they were rescued from. Where in your own life are you tempted to go back to old patterns of bondage, habits, fears, or ways of earning approval, that Christ has already freed you from?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses Paul’s warning into our own experience. The Galatians were tempted to return to a specific bondage, but the pull backward toward slavery is universal. Every believer has been freed from something, and every believer knows the strange gravity that draws us back toward it.

Help students name their particular Egypt. For one it may be an old sin or addiction; for another, a pattern of fear, control, or people-pleasing; for another, the exhausting habit of trying to earn God's love. Freedom can feel unfamiliar and exposed, and the old bondage, though miserable, at least felt known. Naming the specific pull is the first step to resisting it.

Explain why we drift back. Often it is in seasons of stress, disappointment, or weariness that the old chains start to look comforting again. The enemy whispers that grace was too good to be true, that we had better return to something we can control. Recognizing these moments helps us stand firm when they come.

Point to the way forward. We resist the backward pull not by white-knuckling but by remembering and returning to the freedom Christ purchased, by leaning into the church, and by walking in the Spirit. Invite students to name the specific bondage they feel drawn back toward and one way they will press forward instead.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The universal temptation to return to former bondage
- Seasons of stress and weariness as occasions of drift
- Freedom maintained by remembrance, community, and the Spirit
- Standing firm rather than crawling back to old chains

Discussion Prompts

- What former bondage do you feel the pull to return to?
- When are you most tempted to go back, and why?
- What is one way you will press forward into freedom instead?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul is troubled that they "observe days and months and seasons and years" (4:10), taking up religious calendar-keeping as a way of securing their standing with God. How do we tell the difference between this kind of bondage to ritual and the genuine freedom of new covenant worship, such as gathering on the Lord's Day?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul names the symptom of the Galatians' drift: "You observe days and months and seasons and years." They were taking up the old covenant ceremonial calendar, and ritual observance in general, as though their standing with God depended on keeping the right religious days. Paul treats this as a return to bondage, because it shifts the ground of acceptance from Christ back to performance.

Help students see what makes this bondage. The problem is not the existence of special days as such, but the belief that keeping them earns or secures our righteousness. When a religious practice becomes a means of justification, a box to check so that God will accept us, it enslaves, because we can never be sure we have kept enough. The calendar becomes a treadmill.

Now draw the careful distinction our heritage requires. Paul is not condemning the new covenant practice of gathering on the first day of the week to worship, break bread, and give, which is the apostolic pattern (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10). The Lord's Day is not a Sabbath imposed for righteousness or a ritual by which we earn standing; it is the glad, freely offered worship of those already accepted in Christ. There is a world of difference between keeping a day to earn God's favor and gathering on a day to celebrate the favor already given.

Apply the principle broadly. Any good practice, including our own habits of worship and devotion, can curdle into bondage if we begin to trust the practice instead of Christ. The test is always the same: am I doing this to receive acceptance, or out of acceptance already received? Freedom keeps Christ, not the calendar, at the center.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Ritual calendar-keeping as bondage when made a means of justification
- The difference between earning acceptance and acting from acceptance
- The Lord's Day assembly as new covenant worship freely offered, not a Sabbath for righteousness (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2)
- Any practice becoming bondage when trusted in place of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What turns a religious practice into bondage?
- How is gathering on the Lord's Day different from earning standing by a calendar?
- How can you tell whether you act to earn acceptance or from it?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul fears their faith is hardening into mere observance. Has your walk with Christ ever cooled into religious routine and rule-keeping, and what are the warning signs that relationship is slipping into mere ritual for you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns Paul's concern into honest self-examination. Faith that begins as a living relationship can slowly cool into mere routine, where we go through the motions of religion

while the warmth of knowing God fades. The Galatians were sliding in that direction, and we are not immune.

Help students identify the warning signs. Worship that has become a habit we perform rather than an encounter we treasure. Bible reading reduced to a box checked. Prayer shrunk to a ritual recited. A growing sense of duty without delight. These are signals that relationship is slipping toward rote observance.

Be careful to honor faithful routine as well. Not every routine is dead; spiritual disciplines practiced steadily are good, and feelings ebb and flow. The danger is not regularity itself but the loss of the relationship the routines are meant to serve. The goal is not to abandon the practices but to bring the heart back to them.

Point to the renewal that grace offers. When our faith has cooled, the answer is not to try harder at religion but to return to the gospel, to remember whose we are and what Christ has done, and to seek the Lord himself rather than merely his rituals. Invite students to name where their faith has cooled and one way to rekindle the relationship.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of relationship cooling into mere religious routine
- Warning signs: duty without delight, motions without meaning
- Faithful discipline distinguished from dead ritual
- Renewal found in returning to the gospel and to God himself

Discussion Prompts

- Where has your walk with Christ cooled into routine?
- What are the warning signs that relationship is becoming ritual for you?
- How can you rekindle the relationship rather than just the practices?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul recalls the Galatians' former joy and asks, "What then has become of your blessedness?" (4:15). What happens to a believer's joy when they drift from grace into law, and why does legalism so reliably drain the gladness out of faith?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul appeals to memory: "What then has become of your blessedness?" He recalls a time when the Galatians overflowed with joy, so devoted that they would have given him their own eyes. Now that joy has evaporated, and Paul names the cause. As they drifted from grace toward law, their gladness drained away with it.

Explain why legalism kills joy. Grace produces gratitude, security, and rest, because everything depends on what Christ has done. Law produces anxiety, comparison, and exhaustion, because everything depends on what we do. A person who is never sure they have measured up cannot rest, and a heart that cannot rest cannot rejoice. Legalism and joy cannot share the same room.

Help students connect this to their own experience. Many believers can recall a season of fresh joy in Christ that later faded into heaviness, often without noticing the cause. Frequently the cause is exactly what Paul names: a subtle shift from resting in grace to striving under law, from God's acceptance to self-justification.

Point the way back to joy. The recovery of gladness comes not by trying to feel happy but by returning to grace, by remembering that we are accepted in Christ apart from our performance. Joy is the natural fruit of a heart at rest in the gospel. Invite students to consider whether lost joy might be a sign of a drift that needs correcting.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Joy as the fruit of grace, drained away by legalism
- Grace producing rest and gratitude, law producing anxiety and exhaustion
- Lost joy as a possible symptom of a drift from grace to law
- The recovery of joy through return to the gospel

Discussion Prompts

- Why does legalism so reliably drain away joy?
- Have you known a season of joy that later faded, and why?
- How might returning to grace restore your gladness?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul asks whether he has become their enemy "by telling you the truth" (4:16). How do you typically respond when someone who loves you tells you something true but hard to hear, and what would it look like to receive such truth with humility?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul asks a poignant question: "Have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?" He had loved the Galatians enough to tell them what they needed to hear rather than what they wanted to hear, and for that honesty he was being treated as an opponent. This question turns the mirror toward how we receive hard truth.

Help students recognize the instinct to resent the truth-teller. When someone confronts our sin, our error, or our blind spot, our first reflex is often defensiveness, hurt, or anger at the person

rather than gratitude for the truth. We are tempted to prefer the flatterer who tells us what we like over the friend who tells us what is real.

Hold up the biblical value of faithful wounds. Scripture says the wounds of a friend are faithful, while the kisses of an enemy are deceitful (Proverbs 27:6). The person willing to risk our displeasure for our good is a treasure, not an enemy. Learning to receive correction humbly is a mark of spiritual maturity.

Encourage a posture of teachability. Invite students to think of a recent time someone told them a hard truth, and to ask how they responded. Then encourage them to cultivate the humility that thanks the truth-teller and weighs the truth, rather than shooting the messenger.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to resent those who tell us hard truths
- Defensiveness as a barrier to growth and correction
- The value of faithful wounds from a friend (Proverbs 27:5–6)
- Teachability and humility as marks of maturity

Discussion Prompts

- How do you usually react when someone tells you a hard truth?
- Why do we prefer flatterers to faithful friends?
- What would it look like to receive correction with humility?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul exposes the false teachers: “They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them” (4:17). How can a believer discern teachers and influences by their true motives and fruit rather than by how flattering or attractive they seem?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul exposes the false teachers’ motives with surgical precision: “They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.” Their attentiveness was a tactic. They courted the Galatians’ affection in order to win a following and exalt themselves. Flattery was the bait; control was the goal.

Help students develop discernment about influences. The flattering teacher, the charismatic leader, the attractive message can all be evaluated not only by how they make us feel but by where they lead and what they produce. Jesus taught us to know teachers by their fruit (Matthew 7:15–20). Does this influence lead me toward Christ and freedom, or toward dependence on the teacher and bondage?

Name the warning signs of self-serving teaching. It tends to draw attention and devotion to the teacher rather than to Christ. It often isolates followers from other godly voices, as the false teachers tried to shut the Galatians out. It flatters rather than forms, telling people what they want to hear. Discernment watches for these patterns.

Anchor discernment in the apostolic word. The surest protection against being misled is to test every teaching against Scripture, the complete and authoritative word of God (Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 3:16–17). We are not at the mercy of every persuasive voice; we have a fixed standard by which to weigh them all.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Discerning teachers by their motives and fruit, not their charm (Matthew 7:15–20)
- Self-serving teaching that exalts the teacher and isolates followers
- Flattery as a tool of control
- Scripture as the fixed standard for testing all teaching (Acts 17:11)

Discussion Prompts

- How can you discern a teacher's true motives and fruit?
- What are the warning signs of teaching that serves itself?
- How does testing everything by Scripture protect you?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul contrasts the flattery of false teachers with his own costly love. Whose approval or attention are you most tempted to crave, and how does that craving leave you open to being used or misled?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the false teachers' flattery into a mirror for our own hearts. The Galatians were vulnerable to manipulation partly because they craved the attention being lavished on them. The same craving in us, the hunger to be made much of, leaves us open to being used and misled.

Help students examine where they hunger for approval. We may crave the regard of a particular person, a group, a leader, or a crowd, and that craving can quietly steer our decisions and loyalties. Those who flatter us gain influence over us, because we are reluctant to displease the source of attention we crave.

Connect this to the freedom Paul has been preaching. When our deepest need to be made much of is met in Christ, who knows us and loves us, we are far less susceptible to those who would

use flattery to control us. A heart secure in God's love does not have to chase the approval that manipulators offer.

Move toward freedom. Invite students to identify whose approval they most crave and to consider how resting in God's love might loosen that craving's grip. The cure for the hunger to be made much of by people is to be satisfied in being made much of by God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The craving to be made much of as a doorway to manipulation
- Approval-hunger steering loyalties and decisions
- Security in God's love as protection against flattery
- Satisfaction in God freeing us from chasing human approval

Discussion Prompts

- Whose approval or attention are you most tempted to crave?
- How might that craving leave you open to being misled?
- How does being loved by God loosen the grip of that craving?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul calls the Galatians his "little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (4:19). What does it mean that the true goal of all Christian teaching and ministry is Christ being formed in us, and how does this reframe the whole Christian life as transformation into his likeness rather than merely gaining information or keeping rules?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question reaches the doctrinal and pastoral heart of the lesson. Paul calls the Galatians "my little children," and says he is "again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you." In one phrase he reveals the goal of all his labor and of all genuine Christian ministry. The aim is not merely that people hold right opinions or keep right rules, but that Christ himself be formed in them.

Unfold what this means. To have Christ formed in us is to be progressively transformed into his likeness, so that his character, his love, his holiness, and his heart take shape in us. This is the great purpose of salvation, that we be conformed to the image of God's Son (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18). Forgiveness and justification are the gracious beginning; formation into Christ is where God is taking us.

Show how this reframes the entire Christian life. If the goal were merely information, then learning facts would be enough. If it were merely rule-keeping, then external compliance would suffice. But the goal is transformation, Christ formed within, and that changes everything. Bible

study aims at a changed heart, not just a filled notebook. Obedience flows from a transformed character, not just a disciplined will. The whole of discipleship is the lifelong process of Christ being formed in us.

Note the cost and the patience this requires. Paul speaks of the anguish of childbirth, a long and painful labor. Formation into Christ is not instant; it is the slow, sometimes painful work of grace over a lifetime, and it calls for patience with ourselves and with one another. Teachers, parents, and the whole church share in this labor, longing and laboring for Christ to take shape in those they love.

Tie it back to the danger of turning back. This is why Paul is so distressed by the Galatians' drift. To turn back to law and bondage is to abandon the very process of being formed into Christ, settling for rule-keeping when God intends transformation. The remedy for drift is to fix our eyes again on this glorious goal and press toward it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ formed in the believer as the goal of all ministry (Galatians 4:19)
- Transformation into the image of God's Son as the purpose of salvation (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18)
- The Christian life as formation, not merely information or rule-keeping
- Spiritual formation as a slow, costly, lifelong work of grace
- The whole church laboring for Christ to take shape in one another

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean for Christ to be formed in you?
- How does this goal reframe Bible study, obedience, and discipleship?
- Why does formation require patience and even pain?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole passage. Paul pleads with the Galatians not to turn back but to press on until Christ is fully formed in them. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you, this week, to move forward into freedom rather than slip back into bondage.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone gathers Paul's plea into a single call: do not turn back; press on until Christ is formed in you. The whole passage has held two directions before us, the backward pull toward bondage and the forward call toward transformation, and the lesson ends by asking students to choose, concretely, to move forward.

Help students translate this into one specific step. Pressing forward might mean refusing a particular old chain they have felt drawn back toward, recovering a cooled relationship with God, welcoming a hard truth they have been resisting, or cooperating more intentionally with the work of Christ being formed in them. The aim is one clear movement in the right direction.

Remind them that they do not press on alone. The same Spirit who makes us cry Abba is at work forming Christ in us, and the church labors alongside us. Forward progress is not a matter of solitary willpower but of yielding to grace within the family of God.

Close in hope. The God who began a good work will carry it on to completion (Philippians 1:6). The labor pains are real, but so is the promised outcome, Christ fully formed in his people. Send students home leaning forward, not backward, toward the day when his likeness is complete in them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The call to press forward rather than turn back
- Cooperation with the Spirit in being formed into Christ
- Transformation pursued within the family of the church
- Confidence that God will complete the good work he began (Philippians 1:6)

Discussion Prompts

- What is one way you will press forward rather than turn back this week?
- How does the Spirit's work free you from relying on willpower alone?
- How does the promise of completion give you hope to continue?