

MEDITATIONS IN GALATIANS

So, I've been thinking about this passage of Scripture for the past couple of days...

So now that you know God (or should I say, now that God knows you), why do you want to go back again and become slaves once more to the weak and useless spiritual principles of this world? [Galatians 4:9 ---NLT]

Before I get into what I've been thinking about, let's look at a **couple more versions** (or translations) of this passage:

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? [NASB]

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 principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? [NIV]

The context of this passage is dealing with Gentile converts who had been proselytized by the Jewish Christians. These [Judaizers](#) had been following the missionary stops of Paul (the apostle) and introduced a different gospel to the new believers. In this letter to the young believers in Galatia, Paul sternly rebukes them for abandoning the message of truth and freedom he had preached to them. Great. Wonderful... and I mean this. The lesson, message, and encouragement gleaned from this story alone is fantastic, but is there something more the Holy Spirit would minister to me? I think there is...

First, Paul begins, ***“So now that you know God (or should I say, now that God knows you).”*** My heart is cut to the quick with this statement. I go through my life rather confident that “I know God.” And I believe that I do. However, as I have let these words sink into the deep parts of my mind and heart over the last couple of days I wonder how far the reflection of my life falls short of ***“now that I know God.”*** I don't mean this to be a false humility moment, I'm serious. I try to live my life above reproach and I'm striving to learn and grow in the ways of Jesus. I earnestly study, pray, and practice spiritual disciplines. I involve myself in the community of faith and Jesus-following disciples around me. I am conscious of the areas that need people who are purposing the Kingdom of God and try to join along in that work as best I can with what I am able to contribute; my money, my time, my talents, and other resources as they are realized. But, I still feel as though I fall short. ***“Now that I know God,”*** is an incredible statement packed with implication, indebtedness, inference, and invitation. I feel as though the weight of that realization is almost more than I can bear; the mere attempt at understanding what it means to ***“know God”*** is over my head, and I tremble.

Perhaps this is why we are not so unlike the Galatians. Paul asks them; ***“why do you want to go back again and become slaves once more to the weak and useless spiritual principles of this world?”*** Going back to the comfortable and the known is not so scary as the unknown... even if this means being a slave to it; even if it means settling for a fraction of the life that we have been promised. The Bible is full of these examples throughout the Old Testament Scriptures, and our own history is full of examples as well. Honestly, I too am an example of this. I am an example in many ways. I've been distracted by the noises and tyranny of life around me. I've made excuses for not fully engaging in work that God is involved in... I've allowed my health; physical and mental, to affect my spiritual development. And, I could go on and on I'm sure. The truth is all of the examples I've given and more I'm sure, are examples of ***“going back again and becoming a slave to the weak and useless spiritual principles of this world.”*** We are told the battle we wage is not of this world, but principalities that war in heavenly places for our soul (Ephesians 6:12). When I remove my eyes from the glory of God, when I allow myself to be distracted by the anxious things of this world... I am becoming a slave to the weak and

useless spiritual principles of this world. To my understanding, I do not think I am overly out of context with the application of this passage of Scripture. Might this strike us as closer to home and more in line with the text??? If all my actions are observing the rules of my particular church (don't touch, don't say, don't watch, don't think...) and the most I apply the words and teachings of my faith is in the context of the law's letter (Sunday school, weekly worship services, the occasional service project), how am I different than those following the Judaizers? Or, if I do attempt to follow after the Jesus I profess my love, and my actions are to endear me to Him... am I attempting to earn His favor? Where is the freedom in this?

No. I don't want to fall short. I don't want to feel tired or fearful as I endeavor to become like Jesus. I want to live in freedom and I want to confidently say "I know God, or He knows me." And, I don't want to freak out about that. I desire to live in the freedom and confidence of position in person of my Savior Jesus. When we live like this, great things happen for the kingdom of God, and He is exalted before men. I pray this continues to serve as a reminder and a call to action. A call to drop the pretense, a call to abandon the useless spiritual principles of this world, and a call to embrace the always present Presence of the Living God who has enabled me and empowered me to share in His Person and His Spirit. Praise Him.

More on the Letter to the Galatians...

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians is a continuing focus of meditation for me. As I have been reflecting upon this letter, a couple of other passages of text have come to my mind. I realize that my combining these portions of Scripture may seem a little hermeneutically unorthodox; and for that, I apologize. I need to add that in spite of, or in light of this, I still do not think there are any contextual errors or other inaccuracies and I'm open to correction and challenge, so feel free to call me on anything that seems too far of a stretch. Ok, that's my disclaimer... Here's the passage of text (or texts) with accompanying references:

Oh, foolish Galatians! **Who has bewitched you?** (*Or "who has cast an evil spell on you?"*)[Galatians 3:1] Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. **Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits.** [Galatians 4:8-9] I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are **turning to a different gospel.** [Galatians 1:6] You were running well; **who prevented you from obeying the truth?** [Galatians 5:7] We must listen very carefully to the truth we have heard, or we may drift away from it. [Hebrews 2:1] **Jesus said; "So pay attention to how you hear. To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given. But for those who are not listening, even what they think they understand will be taken away from them."** [Luke 8:18 NLT]

"Who has [bewitched](#) you?" Paul asks... Other [translations](#) put it like this; **"who has cast an evil spell on you?"** Eugene Peterson's well known [Message Translation](#) paraphrases the meaning as follows: *"You crazy Galatians! Did someone put a hex on you? Have you taken leave of your senses? Something crazy has happened, for it's obvious that you no longer have the crucified Jesus in clear focus in your lives."*

Who has bewitched you?

There is an interesting image painted in these words. It points to and describes a people who have been fooled, tricked, misled, and more. The word Paul uses seems to infer that the people are near helplessly hypnotized almost beyond the point of being able to escape from bondage of the eyes, mind, heart, and soul. It's sad...heartbreaking even. Elsewhere in the letter Paul describes the pure joy in which the Galatians received the message of life and freedom when he had first preached the Gospel of Christ to them on his first visit. Now, the Galatians had deserted the message of life and started to follow lifeless teaching that promised death and separation from Christ ("You are severed from Christ, you

who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.” **Galatians 5:4**). This describes an epic tragedy of eternal proportion. *Who has cast an evil spell on you?*

But... I think the epic tragedy extends beyond the pages of the Galatian church. I think these words speak as loudly and convicting to us today as they were spoken to the Galatians some two-thousand years ago. I believe that we are just as easily “bewitched” into believing and “turning to a different gospel” as the people rebuked by Paul. What were they rebuked for and what were they following? Particularly, they were being taught to follow the Law of Moses; observing the traditions, ritual, festivals, feasts, and holy days the Jewish people had observed for centuries. I don’t think observation and/or participation in these traditions were catastrophic in themselves, but the rebuke was born from recognizing that the means of redemption and salvation through relationship with Jesus had shifted from the Savior-King to “doing” Jewish things.

“...Yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.” [Galatians 2:16]

And how does this apply to us today? I think we can find a number of parallels within our ranks... First as I mentioned in [my previous post](#), there are many ways that we “appear” to justify our faith through our own “acts of the Law.” Sure, we profess our faith through the redemptive-salvific work of Jesus Christ, His crucifixion, and resurrection. However, in many cases we will add (as did the Judaizers) to that foundation other “acts of righteousness” that provide us with “visible” evidence of our “salvation.” I know I have heard the following phrases on more than one occasion over the course of my lifetime: *“Good Christians, don’t dress like that...”* or *“Good Christians don’t go to those places...”* Other examples might be *“Christians shouldn’t smoke, drink alcohol, watch certain movies, or read certain books and/or magazines...etc.”* While the things mentioned in these statements might not be the most profitable things for a person to partake of or participate in, they will neither “save” nor “damn” a person, but you might not realize that from talking to some Christians. In my estimation, we have not made significant improvement from the days of the Galatian church. This particular point could be discussed at length, but I think my point has been made and it is not the real topic of this post. I want to explore something else; I’m curious why we follow the path of the Galatians at all. **Who or what has bewitched us; what evil spell have we fallen victim to?**

My wife, Laurie, [made an excellent point the other day](#) in a reply to my first reflection on this Letter to the Galatians. I think her question and comment ties into what I’m trying to put into words today. So... let me make a jump here.

The relationship between man and God is supposed to be one that has been reconciled through the work and person of Jesus. I realize that is a very truncated statement and there is much more that could be said on that, but nonetheless, Christ has provided us a means of being reconciled with God. Now, Jesus gives us a glimpse of what this reconciliation permits and provides in his Gethsemane prayer ([John 17](#)). Our relationship with the Godhead can be such that we are unified in Trinitarian Oneness and love. We are permitted and empowered through the work of Christ and indwelling Holy Spirit to [embody the character and fruit of God’s Spirit](#). What does this look like in practical terms? I think, according to Scripture, that it looks like people healing one another (mentally, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually) reconciling one another back to God through the incarnation of Christ in their lives (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). I think it looks like people healing and reconciling the earth. I think it means people are able and capable of working through personality conflicts and allowing the Spirit of God to heal differences. I think it means the Church would begin to look like the Bride of Christ, a shining beacon of hope and healing to all the earth. Alas, this is not what we see. Now, don’t misunderstand me. I realize that people are broken and until the Lord Jesus returns, we will continue to be in a state of flux and continuing perfection. We may never realize, this side of Eternity, ourselves as the spotless Bride of Christ. Ok, I concede this point. However, if the Church (and the Christians who profess to comprise Her) were following the example of Christ and heeding the words of freedom written by the Apostle Paul, we might be seeing a different reality than the one we currently participate in.

What evil spell have we fallen victim to...?

I think for the most part, we simply have not paid attention to the path of God as guided by the Holy Spirit. Many of us will remember when we heard the Spirit “call to us” and we answered the call to salvation. Experiencing the sweet voice of God in our hearts, soothing our hurts, healing our hearts, and removing our guilt is or was a very memorable and profound moment in many Christian’s lives... it is for me. Can you recall the joy you felt, the excitement, and hunger for God’s Word? Can you remember how, when you first began to read God’s Word, the Scripture would “leap” off the page and dive right into your brain and bury itself into your heart? Have you or did you ever begin to sing songs of praise and inexplicably...the tears of joyous release would stream down your face as you just began to say “thank You, thank You, thank You Jesus!” How long ago has it been since you felt that way?

I think, in the same way that relationships atrophy between human beings, the relationship between man and God can atrophy. “Life” can get in the way and complicate human relationships, friendships, and marriages. A job change, a move across country or town, an argument, or some other life change can strain a relationship. People stop communicating regularly, they stop seeing one another regularly, and soon enough the relationship begins to grow cold...distant... a memory of something that once was.

I think “life” can be one of two things; it can be abundant (with Christ) or it can be the “bewitching” and evil spell (without Christ). Although Christ Jesus is the One who has all authority in Heaven and on Earth, there are still powers and principalities that are at work to win our souls. I believe these powers and principalities continually weave the illusion that has bewitched so many “believers.” The American Dream is a “spell.” Politics is a spell. The Culture Wars are a spell... The Rat Race of the daily grind is a spell... and I could go on. We will follow these illusions (yes, I know they are very real...) and get sidetracked from our first and true Love, Jesus. We begin to chase a “better” life through our own works, education, occupation, comfort, pleasure, and more... and all the while our chase carries us further and further from becoming like the One who sacrificed Himself for our salvation. In the process, we substitute our relationship with the Triune God for “acts” of righteousness which make us no different than the Galatians who were rebuked by Paul. It is true.

Take heart. He calls us back to Himself. The romance between Creator and created can be as passionate and fulfilling as it ever was, and truly... even more so. It requires fidelity and desire. What is it you want? Jesus loves us and wants us to put Him first. Do not be bewitched any longer; break the spell.

Freedom’s just another word...

I’m still “mining gold” from the Letter to Galatians... and I still don’t have this one all “worked” out, but I’m gonna share my thoughts anyway. Forgive me if they seem a little scattered and not completely cohesive.

I love the dialectic approach of the Apostle as he presents his case to the Galatians. His series of arguments throughout the letter arrive at their culminating truth in chapter five; “***...What is important is faith expressing itself in love***” (Galatians 5:6). He expresses this “bottom line” idea and then presents an illustration of freedom from the perspective of God versus the view of mankind.

“You have been called to live in freedom, use your freedom to serve one another in love. The whole Law can be summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another... Let the Holy Spirit guide your lives Then you won’t be doing what your sinful nature craves.” [Galatians 5:13-16]

Freedom...

Yesterday while I was in my training class for a new job, a memo was circulated reminding the employees that our company practices a "Tobacco Free" policy. This means no tobacco products on the company property...at all. No smoking, dipping, or chewing... at all. There are no designated areas, and it's not allowed in your car in the company parking lot. Tobacco free means not allowed. Needless to say, this inspired the ire of a number of dissenters. A few brief conversations lit up the classroom with a couple of them sparking thought in my own mind. One of the comments posed was something about *"land of the free..."* Another comment questioned the *"rights of the people."* Still another comment came in these words; *"too many rules will kill people."* There were a few other ideas and comments over this memo, but I believe you get the gist. People weren't happy; including quite a few non-smokers.

I think what is interesting to me is the skewed understanding of "freedom;" what it means and how it plays out. To one person, freedom means they are allowed or "free" to do whatever they please. Actually, this definition of freedom sounds more like anarchy to me than it does freedom. Ironically, this person's freedom (to do as and when they please) may impinge the "freedom" of another person. Let's use smoking cigarettes as an example. Person one chooses to exercise their freedom to smoke in an area designated as a break area at our place of employment. I exercise my freedom to take a break in the designated area. I'm not a smoker, yet because the nature of smoking entails smoke, I invariably end up having my freedom violated with smoke (smelling it myself, ingesting it into my system, and having my clothes scented with it). In this case, one person's exercise of freedom becomes another person's violation of freedom.

I don't know how prevalent this definition of freedom is, but over the course of my life's experience I've heard quite a few people define freedom as being able to "do as they please." True, some more generous folks will qualify that definition to include: "free to do as I please as long as it doesn't harm anyone else." However, the defining points of that qualification are subjective. Who, or what, defines "harm?" Reality suggests that we share space on this planet and that being the case; one person's freedom is another person's oppression. In truth, our freedom (to do as we please) only extends to the tip of our nose before we invade the space of someone or something else. This, I believe, is what Paul suggests when he writes; *"You have been called to live in freedom, use your freedom to serve one another in love."* What does *using your freedom to serve one another in love* really mean; and what does it look like?

Freedom & Love and Love & Freedom

The Apostle groups together some very choice words: faith, freedom, and love. He writes; *"...What is important is faith expressing itself in love"* and *"You have been called to live in freedom, use your freedom to serve one another in love."* How does love express itself?

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. [1 Corinthians 13:4-8]

The freedom that displays this type of love is not born of narcissistic indulgence. No, the freedom that displays this type of love is selfless and sacrificial in execution. A high bar that seems counterintuitive to what we would understand "freedom" to be. According to the argument presented by Paul, freedom is equivalent to slavery... self-willed and self-imposed to be sure, but slavery nonetheless. It almost doesn't seem fair... until:

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was

born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. [Philippians 2:5-11]

Are we capable of extolling and lavishing this type of servant love upon another human being? Maybe we can do it for people we like or care deeply for. Can we exude this type of "freedom-born" love upon a human being we do not like? Can we love people we don't like? *Hmmm...* Tough questions for sure, but **"...what is important is faith expressing itself in love"** and **"you have been called to live in freedom, so use your freedom to serve one another in love."** This was the attitude of Christ, and the Apostle Paul informs us that our attitude must be the same. Can we do it? Yes, we can. It begins with our willingly laying aside our rights; Jesus said this was denying self to take up our cross and follow Him. You will remember the Apostle's words from earlier in this letter: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." [Galatians 2:20].

Freedom; is it the permission to do as I please? Or, is *"Freedom just another word for nothing left to lose..."*

Agitated, Distracted, and Bewitched

I continue to meditate daily on the Scripture from Galatians and seek God to teach me understanding from these passages as I go through my dailiness. One of the thoughts in an earlier post included some consideration given to the question from Paul the Apostle; "who has bewitched you?" I haven't been able to completely shake this question and I keep returning to it, seeing so many things that "bewitch" us and mislead us...taking us away from the Presence of God during our day and wandering off on the "rabbit trails" that would bewitch us and distract us from His Glory. This morning, I read the following from Sister Joan Chittister:

Agitation drives out consciousness of God. When we're driven by agitation, consumed by fretting, we become immersed in our own agenda and it is always exaggerated. We get caught up in things that, in the final analysis. Simply don't count, in things that pass away, in things that are concerned with living comfortably rather than living well. We go to pieces over crying children and broken machines and the length of stop lights at intersections. We lose touch with the center of things.

*At the same time, a kind of passive tranquility is not the aim of Benedictine life. The call of this spirituality is to be gentle ourselves and to bring nonviolence in our wake. It is an amazing position for a sixth-century document to take in a violent world. There is no Armageddon theology here, no call to a pitched battle between good and evil in a world that subscribed to dualism and divided life into things of the spirit and things of the flesh. Joan Chittister; *The Rule of Benedict*, p.24.*

We can be so easily distracted... the one thing that everyone seeks, regardless of their awareness of it or not, and regardless of the visible object of their chase ...is God. It is the hunger of our souls. It is amazing how easily we are distracted from seeking Him and settling for a lesser god. What is bewitching you?

Agitated, Distracted, and Bewitched – Part 2

“What is bewitching you?”

I extend apologies if my words that follow sound somewhat random in my opening remarks. I don't know if you are following along or not, but you can [catch up here](#) if you're interested in where this is coming from... I'm still following reflections on the Letter from Paul to the Galatians.

Regardless of our understanding with issues of spiritual depression or those “dark nights of the soul,” Jesus said He would never forsake us... “Lo, I am with you always.” (Matthew 28:20). So then, what happens when we feel removed from, or distant from, the Presence of God? Consider emotions like anxiety, stress, anxiousness, aggravation, and agitation (to name a few). Where do these feelings come from; how do those feelings invade our being when we may have been (just moments before) experiencing sweet peace and fellowship with God's indwelling Holy Spirit?

I realize my commentary may seem to have deviated from the original intent of the Letter to Galatians, but I think my thoughts remain true to the *uber-arche* that is the human and “**that**” is part of the narrative that is this letter. The writer, Paul, asks his listeners what has “bewitched” them... what has distracted them to the point they would leave the greatest liberating force of their lives in order to follow a paradigm that is no force at all and whose destination is sure despair, destruction, and ultimate defeat.

¹⁶So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

¹⁹The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. ²⁵Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. [Galatians 5:16-26]

Distractions

The blessing of new creation (which is what we become) through the redeeming, reconciling, and restoring work of Jesus Christ provides believers the means and empowerment to live daily and always in the Presence of the Triune God. The formerly broken relationship between man and God is reconciled and restored... on this side of Eternity, in this present and physical world, we are permitted to walk in whole and holy relationship with the God of the universe. We are capable of and invited to experience the blessed guidance and counsel of the same Spirit of God that inhabited and empowered the risen Savior-God, Jesus Christ.

Reality Check

Personally, I can't help but examine and ponder my own experience compared to the “new creation life” that I read about in the Bible (*especially the New Testament*). I fully believe the Bible and its entire claim to be true; otherwise I would not be striving to follow it. Therefore, I believe my experience should be more closely aligned with, and reflective

of, the thoughts I share in the paradigm of the aforementioned paragraph. Is it? Is my experience fully submitted to the Spirit's leading? Do I live in complete harmony with Jesus?

I want to answer yes, but find myself becoming distracted or "bewitched" by the smoke and mirror trickery of powers and principalities of this world. Don't misunderstand my words; I do not believe there is demonic influence or oppression behind every distraction or trial of man. I **do believe** our present world is still in a fallen state and subject to that "fallenness." However, as I have also expressed in other blog posts, I believe that we are in a state of redemption and being redeemed... meaning there is still yet to come a whole and ultimate redemption, but we are still permitted and invited into participation of redemption-reconciliation-restoration through the work of Jesus Christ today... now.

What about distractions and being "bewitched" though?

Ok. So, (1) we are permitted to live in reconciled relationship with God, (2) we are able to take control of oppressive thoughts and bring them into submission to the Lordship of Christ, (3) we are capable of living in peace, joy, and godly love, and (4) we are given the choice to follow the unfailing guidance of the Holy Spirit of God Almighty who indwells the heart, mind, and soul of the transformed believer. We believe, according to Jesus, the kingdom of redemption, reconciliation, and restoration of God is here today and still yet to come, but we are capable of experiencing the fruit of the ultimate kingdom today... on this side of eternity. Why do we still choose to pursue distractions and allow ourselves to become "bewitched?"

Speaking out loud from my own experience and observation, I think the problem of our "bewitching" (*the distractions of life that remove our focus and sight from God*) is twofold. The first is our failure to truly accept the forgiveness and freedom of His grace to us. I think this stems from a continued lack of trust in the God we profess to trust. This problem goes back to the first sin of man (Adam) and we continue to suffer from it. In most cases with man and sin, we can find that pride and trust intermix to overthrow God as the Sovereign in our lives. Ultimately, since we do not trust God, we seek to find bastions of our present reality to cement our trust and place our faith (work-career, social status, participation or non-participation in certain activities, affiliations with groups and organizations, and etc) ...and this, removes our focus and relationship with God to something else which ultimately deceives and fails us.

The second problem is systemic to our Greek influenced Western world. Our general approach to the essence of life is [dualistic](#) and also suffers from various forms of [Gnosticism](#) (*follow the links to learn more on those terms*). In very simple language, we separate our relationship and compartmentalize most facets of worshiping God and following the ways of Jesus Christ in our lives. We toss around terms like "spiritual life" and "secular world" as if this is the normal way of viewing our relationship with God... the inner life and the outer life. We have been bewitched by thinking this way. The Hebrew mind (and the teaching God gives to us) does not separate the essence of man or the life he lives. We are commanded to ***"love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength."*** There is so much more that can be said about this, but I'll save that for another time.

A recent reading from a piece from Joan Chittister expressed much more eloquently than I could, a clear image of this duality. She writes as follows:

The private preserves of the spiritual life are far from dead, however. It is so much easier to go to daily Mass and feel good about it than it is to serve soup at a soup kitchen. It is so much more comfortable to say bedtime prayers than it is to speak peace in a warring world. It is so much more satisfying to contribute to the building of a new church than it is to advocate welfare legislation. It is so much more heroic to fast than it is to be patient

with a noisy neighbor. It is so much easier to give the handshake of peace in church than it is to speak gently in the family. And yet one without the other is surely fraud if life with God in community is truly of the essence of real spiritual growth.

The messages of the Prologue (The Rule of Benedict) are clear: Life is very short. To get the most out of it, we must begin to attend to its spiritual dimensions without which life is only half lived. Holiness is in the Now but we go through life only half conscious of it, asleep or intent on being someplace other than where we are. We need to open our eyes and see things as they exist around us: what is valuable and what is not, what enriches and what does not, what is of God and what is not. It may be the neighborhood we live in rather than the neighborhood we want that will really make human beings out of us. It may be the job we have rather than the position we are selling our souls to get that will finally liberate us from ourselves. It may be what we do rather than the prayers we pray that will finally be the measure of our sanctity.

God is calling us to more than the material level of life and God is waiting to bring us to it. All we have to do is to live well with others and live totally in God. All we have to do is to learn to listen to the voice of God in life. And we have to do it heart, soul, and body. The spiritual life demands all of us. ~~Joan Chittister; The Rule of Benedict – Insights For the Ages [pp.31-32]

Why are we so easily bewitched? Why are we so quick to follow a way that is not *The Way*?

I caught glimpse of another parallel this weekend. Paul writes with direct reference in his letter to the Galatians concerning the old covenants (Abrahamic and Mosaic) and the new covenant of Jesus Christ. This past weekend I was in a worship gathering and heard a teaching from Hebrews 12:18-29. In this letter the writer recalls the first meeting of the Israelites with God at Sinai following the exodus from Egypt. I don't recall the entire point of the teaching, but my mind was drawn to the similarities I noticed from my own study and reflection on this Galatians letter and this text from Hebrews. The writer is sharing his words in a very forthright manner or so it seems. There appears to be an urgency in his words for his readers to understand what he is saying... it's as if they too have lost their way. Sinai still exists today for so many Christians who decide that living in the shadow of fear, the unknown, and an angry, unpredictable god (lower case intended) is better than living in wholly continuous fellowship with the God of Zion. The problem, in my opinion, is that many people consider "living in Zion" to be more work and more costly in personal sacrifice than the cost of living in the shadow of Sinai. Truthfully, it is...more costly to live in Zion. Zion cost Christ his life, the cost for us is nothing less than the same. The cost of Sinai is occasional sacrifice, but Sinai brings with it the covenant reward of death. The consequence of choosing Sinai over Zion is eternally catastrophic...and the ripples of that forward-reaching catastrophe reverberate with every tick of the second hand during our present-world existence. We follow our own truth and our improperly lit paths, because we have rejected the illuminated path of whole-hearted surrender that is the price of the Christ Journey.

Can we live in harmony with God; experiencing the sweetness of His Presence in every moment regardless of circumstance? The Scriptures tell us yes. If we disagree, the logical conclusion is that Scripture is a lie or we are a lie. If we follow Scripture according to our own interpretation and selection, we do not follow the God who has chosen to speak to us through His Scripture. The writer of Hebrews emphatically reminds us; "Be careful that you do not refuse to listen to the One who is speaking." (Hebrews 12:25)

How is God speaking to you? What is He saying...? What is your answer? Are you tired of being deceived?

Distraction or Incarnation ...the choice is ours

For the majority of this month (August) I have been reading and meditating on the letter from Paul to the Galatians. As reflected in some of my other blog posts, one of the prominent thoughts I have had during this time of meditation has been the apostle's concern for the Galatians and how easily they have been **distracted** from the path of Christ Jesus [Galatians 3:1]. In my opinion, we have not made much progress since the letter was written... We too are easily distracted, or "bewitched," to borrow the word most commonly used and translated from Paul's letter. Let me share with you a personal example...

Among other things, my new job has been weighing on me; there are several factors that contribute to this weight, but they are not really the point of this posting. What **is important** is that I recognize how easily I can be distracted if I allow myself to be "bewitched" by the weight of my job or any other of the myriad of things taking place in the machine works of my daily life. As I've paralleled this Letter to the Galatians alongside "my world" I've realized how quickly my *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23)* can be tested and jeopardized by my choice to remove my focus from the illuminated and guiding voice of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

This morning while on my way to work, with all of this *weighing* on me, I turned to my wife and said to her; "I don't like being distracted... I don't like being **bewitched**. I don't want to have my focus removed from the Presence of God even for a minute. I don't want to be lured into a chase that does not lead to embodiment of the fruit of God's Spirit." We continued our conversation during the short ride to my job and I resolved to be a living representation of Jesus to the people I encountered... it is, after all, what we are called to be, incarnations of the Christ. I am pretty sure that some people I spoke to may not have been aware that they encountered Jesus, but I know that they did. As I prayed before entering work and as I prayed again before speaking to my first customer, and as I prayed again before interacting with my fellow trainees and peers I asked God to help me live Him. It is my most humble and heartfelt prayer;

"Dear Jesus, through Your grace and by Your Spirit, help me to allow others to encounter You through me and likewise, help me to remain focused upon Your Presence that I do not miss You living through the life of others I encounter. May Your Presence be in me and in my view through every moment of every day. Amen."

I'm Special – You're Special

I was not appointed by any group of people or any human authority, but by Jesus Christ himself and by God the Father who raised Jesus from the dead. [Galatians 1:1]

How freeing and affirming is the consolation that comes from this passage. While every child of God may not be "appointed" to do the work of a "Paul," it does not diminish the reality that each child of God has been "appointed" or chosen specifically, individually, and particularly by the mind and hand of God. He chose us. He chose **me**. Jesus reached out for me from beyond eternity for His unique purposes and no "group of people" or "human authority" can alter that truth. This is a great reminder when life feels lonely or the pressures of our circumstance begin to rob us of our joy... Jesus chose me. Amen.

But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by His marvelous grace. Then it pleased Him to reveal His Son to me so that I would proclaim the good news about Jesus... [Galatians 1:15-16] ...God shows no partiality. [Galatians 2:6]

“What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation...” [Galatians 6:15]

I wonder why we so often push back against the Holy Spirit? Here we are, heirs and inheritors of all the promises of God, every one, and so many times we are want to push back against Him and follow our own inclinations and desires. This summer has been a roller coaster ride for me in every facet of my being; emotionally, physically, and spiritually... and while I continue to implement the tools God has given me through the gifts of spiritual discipline I continue to wrestle and war against the nature of self within me. The flesh of “me” pushes back against the “perfecting nature of God” within me. I despise that. I give thanks and glory to God that I can choose to submit to His Spirit, but I don’t like for one minute that I have to choose in the first place.

“...and God’s promise to Abraham belongs to you.” [Galatians 3:28] “And because we are His children, God sent the Spirit of His Son (Jesus) into our hearts, prompting us to call out ‘Abba, Father.’” [Galatians 4:6]

God has sent the Spirit of Jesus into our hearts... therefore; it would seem to me, that we can follow Him. We can truly, literally, and successfully live a life, walk a life, and exhibit the grace and presence of the life that Jesus lived [1 John 2:6]. So, back to my question, I wonder why such a battle rages within me. I wonder why I consider my wants first; I wonder why I filter things through my perspectives first? I wonder why I seek out my comforts first. I generally will **choose** to make these thoughts subservient to the concerns and needs of others, but I wonder why, so often, I have to make the choice their needs and thoughts over mine in the first place. It would seem to me that my old nature has not been completely crucified. *[sigh]*

“I have been crucified. With Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now love in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered himself up for me.” [Galatians 2:20].

And this is my cry... This is my prayer; that one day I will be able to say these words, as did the Apostle Paul, with conviction and authority. One day I will know that the war of my flesh and the raging “me” of self will be complete. I live by faith today that all the promises of God are yes and amen, but I live with hope looking forward to the culmination of all things Christ... including Him within me. Amen.

Pathfinders & Pathlosers: Another Meditation from Galatians

“You are following a different way that pretends to be the good news but is not the good news at all...” Galatians 1:6-7 [NLT]

The Galatians had been introduced to the Gospel of Jesus Christ receiving salvation and reconciliation to God through the atoning work of Jesus as taught to them by the Apostle Paul. The Letter to Galatians finds them deserting the path of Jesus (and/or adding to it), and following the Law of Moses and the traditions of man. The tone of the apostle’s letter reveals this new direction of the Galatians is terribly wrong. Jesus had rebuked the scribes, Pharisees, and the teachers of the law while He walked among them for following a path that was not unto God. Paul himself had been converted from a path of false righteousness, and the writer of the Letter to Hebrews spends a large portion of his treatise arguing his case that only Christ’s way is the true path of salvation; a salvation promised from the beginning of time, and superior to any other way...this including the Law of Moses... Yet, the Galatians had been duped..., fooled..., deceived.

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ, and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you, and want to pervert the gospel of Christ." Galatians 1:6-7 [NRSV]

Sister Joan Chittister writes in her book, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages*, the following:

"The seduction of embarking on a spiritual life is that people can be fooled into believing that wanting it is doing it. They begin to believe that by traveling they have arrived. Worse, perhaps, they begin to allow others to think that by traveling they have arrived. They mistake the idea for the thing and perpetuate the idea."

The Galatians were choosing to follow another way. Although our circumstance and/or situation may be different from theirs in some capacity, how often are we also persuaded to follow an "idea" that is really not THE WAY? My experience has been a sad one. Many of the circles of "believers" I have been a part of have not been students (disciples) of Jesus. Many have professed to receive His grace, but do not follow His teaching... Many do not know His teaching well enough to know how to follow it. What does it take to know the teaching of Jesus? How can we guard against being deceived or persuaded to follow another (wrong) path?

Christine Sine begins to uncover the root of our problem with her insightful reflection on discipleship: *"Salvation is free, discipleship is costly. Salvation is paid for through Christ's death and resurrection. Discipleship is risky; it costs us brothers and sisters, possessions and livelihood. Discipleship means yielding; a call to count the cost to carry our own crosses and follow. Discipleship remakes us; building us afresh, remolding us into the image of God."* As Sister Chittister spoke; *"people can be fooled into believing that wanting it is doing it..."* Many professing Christians have not made the commitment to actually begin following the Ways of Jesus.

The way we avoid being fooled, duped, and/or misled is to be wholly in tune and completely connected to the *Person, Spirit, and Working* of God. Brother Lawrence called this "Practicing the Presence of God." Len Sweet calls this *Semiotics* in his latest book, *NUDGE: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There*. He writes that *semiotics* is the art and science of paying attention... He also writes; *"Our quest is to be so filled with the Spirit of God, and to be wearing interpretive Jesus goggles, that we not only notice, but are able to interpret and respond."* (Respond to where God is and already has been and respond to what He is doing and already has done). *This is practicing the presence of God*. When I consider these things, I remember words and sayings of Jesus when he prefaced his teaching with statements like, "Let him who has ears hear" and "my sheep know my voice and follow me." Of course he used other words as well that reflected these sentiments, but I think the point is the same; Pay Attention. It is not easy. Once more let me share words from Len Sweet's book *NUDGE*:

One of the earliest admonitions in life is this: "Pay attention." One of the hardest things in the world to do it is this: "Pay attention." Nobody attends to attention. People teach us how to think, but not how to pay attention. But paying attention changes your brain, your being, your future. According to some scholars, the root lig in the word religion means "to pay attention." If so, from its very definition, religion helps us learn to pay attention to people and to life. (pp.50-51)

I believe (most) people (including myself), as broken and depraved as we may be...*want* to do right and good things although, as Joan Chittister writes, "wanting is not doing." In order that we are not "duped" into following another path, we must be fully immersed and engulfed in the Light and Life of Jesus Christ. I cannot say with complete fact what was the weak point of the Galatians who were being led astray by the Judaizers, but it is clear that something was weakening

their understanding. Later in the letter Paul begins writing in more detail about following the guidance and leading of the Holy Spirit and thus overcoming the dark desires of our heart. I believe, based on this detail, the Galatians were not wholly connected to the Person of God and not following the Spirit. How this connects and relates to us is as relevant today as it was two-thousand years ago. I don't think the Galatians or any other Christian would willingly begin to follow a path that leads away from Jesus and toward destruction... no intelligent person would make that choice. The problem with my statement is that it *did happen* and it continues to happen even today. *The truth is that we don't know what we don't know.* Say again? We don't know what we don't know... and this is what gets us into the snares of the enemy.

I wish to share a few Scripture passages that I was reflecting on in conjunction with this passage.

John 8:12 Jesus spoke to the people once more and said, "I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life."

John 8:23-24 Jesus continued, "You are from below; I am from above. You belong to this world; I do not. That is why I said that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I Am who I claim to be, you will die in your sins."

John 8:31-32 Jesus said to the people who believed in him, "You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

John 8:58 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I Am!"

It is in these passages that Jesus is announcing to his hearers and the world that the He, the Presence of God (see Exodus 3:14), is in their midst...He is, here to lead them (you and me) in order that we will not be "lost to darkness" or duped into following another way. *"If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life."* (John 8:12) --- I think what I get from this line of thinking is that we do not have to fear being duped. We do not have to be ever cautious of fearful that we would be led astray... as long as we are connected to the Presence and the Illuminating Guidance of our God in Christ. The Psalmist reports the same conclusion writing the following words of praise:

"You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever." (Psalm 16:11)

The point of this reflection is my attempt to consider how someone (like the Galatians) who had tasted the sweet Presence and Infilling of God in their lives could so quickly desert that sweetness for something that ultimately resulted in bitterness and death. What I think happened (and happens to us) is that it is not a sudden and conscious act. We ever so slightly and subtly become unattached to the Presence and Leading God. We become more sensitive and easily manipulated by the things we are surrounded by and very gradually we are removed from the Light that once led us. Indeed, the Presence of God is still near us, but we are unable to see or respond to it. I would liken it to a trestle that a healthy grape-producing vine is attached to. The trestle has life all around it and sweet fruit surrounds it in all directions, but there is no life or fruit in the trestle at all. The trestle has no conscious awareness of the life that surrounds it because it has no life in it... it is not connected to the vine. Our lives can become very similar to that of the trestle. God's Presence is everywhere. There is nothing that does not bear His "fingerprint." Everything that exists was created for Him and by Him (Colossians 1:15-20). Even though this may be true, we can be seduced by the siren song of darkness... following the path draws our attention to exaltation of "self" or "some other gospel that is no gospel at all."

Living in the Presence of God is more than a choice and more than a verbal affirmation. As I have written earlier, it is a deliberate and disciplined act that takes constant attention. I do believe that it becomes more of our nature with discipline and experience as God's Spirit has more reign and influence in our lives, but I think that should never be taken for granted. We must be diligent in the way we pay attention (Luke 8:18 and Hebrews 2:1), so we are not distracted and fooled into following another path. Consider this soul written about by the teacher in Proverbs.

The way of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, which shines ever brighter until the full light of day. But the way of the wicked is like total darkness. They have no idea what they are stumbling over. Proverbs 4:18-19

We might not lump ourselves in with the "wicked" or want to consider ourselves as in the dark; however, if we are removed from the Light of God's guiding truth, we are in darkness... and we have no idea what we may stumble over. Even worse, we may even emphatically think and swear we are believing and following truth... We can easily find ourselves in the dark... and have no idea what we are stumbling over. Just like the Galatians.
