

Paul: Mellowing of a Fanatic

From the sermon series: No Stained Glass Saints

Text: I Corinthians 9: 22-23

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Spring Lake, Michigan

November 23, 1986

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Brilliant, educated, passionate, Paul is certainly one of the towering figures of all time. With him, perhaps we have come too far in this series; maybe he deserves to be set apart, far removed from the likes of us ordinary mortals. Perhaps here we have met the classic "Hero of the Faith." But before I yield the point too quickly, let us review this Apostle and let him speak for himself.

This series ends with Paul. With him as with all the others, the purpose has not been to deflate, to puncture, to destroy the image commonly held. It has been rather to see that the Bible is not a history of extraordinary individuals, of persons of religious genius or special holiness of life which made them fit instruments for the effecting of God's purposes. Rather, the biblical story is God's story, the record of what He has done and is doing in our history through ordinary people, people like you and me.

To set up biblical characters as almost super human in their faith and devotion, as models of faith and virtue and then to say, "Go thou and do likewise," is to turn the Bible into a moralizing textbook on human conduct rather than the story of God's gracious purpose worked out through common, rag-tag humanity.

Frederick Buechner credits his Old Testament professor, James Murlenburg, with giving him this insight:

What I began to see was that the Bible is not essentially, as I had always more or less supposed, a book of ethical principles, of moral exhortations, of cautionary tales about exemplary people, of uplifting thoughts - in fact, not really a religious book at all in the sense that most of the books you would be apt to find in a minister's study or reviewed in a special religion issue of The New York Times book section are religious. I saw it instead as a great, tattered compendium of writings, the underlying and unifying purpose of all of which is to show how God works through the Jacobs and

the Jabboks of history to make himself known to the world and to draw the world back to himself. (*Now and Then*, p. 20)

A biblical scholar, James Sanders, makes the same point convincingly. He writes,

The Bible ... provides very few models of morality. An honest reading of the Bible indicates how many biblical characters were just as limited and full of shortcomings as we today. It would seem that about seventy-five percent of the Bible celebrates the theologian ... God's providence works in and through human error and sin. The Bible offers no great or infallible models, no saints in the meaning that word has taken on since biblical times - nearly perfect people. None! It offers indeed very few models to follow at all except the work of God in Creation and in Israel in the Old Testament and the work of God in Christ in the New ... We need to read the Bible honestly, recognizing much of it celebrates God's willingness to take our humanity, our frailty, and our limitations and weave them into his purposes. God's grace is not stumped by our limitation... (*God Has a Story Too*, p. 22F)

Now, to Paul: does he confirm the thesis of this series? I suggest that he does. He is the Apostle of Grace *par excellence*. To say that is to focus on his never dying amazement at the grace of God that embraced him, forgave him and transformed him. I have set the focus on Paul with the title "The Mellowing of a Fanatic." A fanatic is a person affected by excessive and mistaken enthusiasm. It speaks of one possessed by a deity or a demon, making one unreasoning.

Paul was richly endowed in mind and spirit; of that there can be little doubt. He had the advantage of Roman citizenship, of the best of rabbinical education. But for all that, he was a person possessed by a narrow, rigid and mean fanaticism. As he humbly confirmed,

I persecuted the church of God.

We know his story well but I think most of our reflection on it has been on the dramatic conversion he experienced on the road to Damascus - that is a thrilling story and the response he made to the grace he received is even more thrilling. But the story is so dramatic because of what Paul was prior to that encounter with Christ.

Paul was religious in the worst sense of the word.

Religion made him moral, but it did not make him good; rather, it made him mean, narrow, bigoted. Paul was a Pharisee, a scrupulous observer of religious rules and rituals. He was a legalist with no sympathy for those of lesser zeal and devotion to the law. He was a driven person knowing no deep assurance and inward peace, and his own enslavement to the "performance principle" made him

coercive in his dealing with others. The self-doubt and anxiety he knew were kept under and masked over by his belligerence to those who differed with him.

He testifies against himself that, when followers of Jesus, followers of the Way, were haled into court, he voted for their death. Telling his story before King Agrippa, he confesses,

It was I who imprisoned many of God's people by authority obtained from the chief priests; and when they were condemned to death, my vote was cast against them. In all the synagogues I tried by repeated punishment to make them renounce their faith; indeed my fury rose to such a pitch that I extended my persecution to foreign cities.

Acts 26:10-11

Not a very nice person. Not a person one would choose to deal with. Religion did its worst work on Paul. It made him mean and bigoted and, when such a spirit is combined with giftedness and passion, we get a very dangerous kind of person.

That is why I hope we never get a president from the ranks of the religious right. Sincerity is not enough. Paul was sincere. Being a worshiper of God is not enough. Paul was a devout Jew. I do not question the sincerity or Christian faith of the vocal fundamentalist crowd in our day, but I fear their spirit even if it is lacquered with smiles and cited with smooth speech. A person who is certain he has hold of the Truth and is convinced he is God's warrior is terribly dangerous. More crimes have been committed, wars waged and havoc wrought by such persons than by any other sort. Paul was a fanatic and fanatics are dangerous.

Paul never got over the damage he had done. Perhaps that is why he never wavered from the grace principle. He knew it was by grace and grace alone that he was saved. He knew there was no way he could repair the damage and rewrite the past. It was done. Only grace could set him free from the horror of what he had done.

Listen to his own testimony and hear the deep humility that clothed him from the moment he met Jesus. Writing in an early correspondence to Corinth, he tells of the appearance of the Risen Lord to him:

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am... I Corinthians 15:8-9

In a later letter to the Ephesians, he wrote,

Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me by the working of his power. To me though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given... Ephesians 3:7-8

Finally, in the First Letter to Timothy, he writes,

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience...I Timothy 1: 15-16

One can sense a descending scale of self-valuation from least of the Apostles to least of the saints to chief of sinners. And as one reads those passages, one senses that this is no over-pious, false humility. This Paul was not through conversion reduced to a pious pansy of a person. There is a ring of Truth, an authentic note that strikes one. Paul is not out to impress those to whom he writes. This is how he really felt. He never lost sight of that from which he had been delivered, that which had been forgiven him, that grace that embraced him and set him free from the guilt of his past and the bondage of that narrow religious legalism that had enslaved him.

The good news of our reflection on Paul is the radical transformation of this person -

from legalist to champion of grace,
from persecutor to Apostle,
from rigid, narrow fanaticism to graciousness and love and freedom.

I could take you many places in Paul's writings to demonstrate the transformation of his character, but since we have begun by detailing the fanaticism that led to coercion and persecution of the Church, let me point you to the new Paul who became the model of flexibility and freedom.

Indeed, I have become everything in turn to men of every sort, so that in one way or another I may save some. I Corinthians 9:22

The context is a discussion about Christian freedom, about whether it is right or wrong to do this or that. The specific question was about eating meat that had been offered to heathen gods. Without trying to explain that issue, let me simply give Paul's answer - It really doesn't matter. You have permission. But if it bothers your brother, don't do it. Always act in a sensitive, loving manner over against your weaker brother.

Paul then demonstrates his principles in his own life and ministry. He asserts the basic fact - "I am a free man and own no master." But because of Jesus Christ and the call to ministry, Paul declares, "I have made myself every man's servant, to win over as many as possible." He then goes on to explain that the context of his ministry on any given occasion determined his manner of life.

Evangelizing Jews, he became like a Jew. Evangelizing Gentiles, he became like a Gentile. To the weak, he became weak. He did whatever was necessary in order to share the gospel and bring persons to faith in Jesus Christ.

We can find this documented in the Book of Acts. In the 16th chapter, Paul meets the young Timothy and wanted him to accompany him on his mission. His mother was a Jewess, his father a Gentile. Paul had him circumcised "out of consideration for the Jews who lived in those parts." This is the Apostle who argued strenuously that circumcision or uncircumcision count for nothing. This was not a matter of legal necessity, of salvation. Paul did what he did so as not to offend in a matter that did not really matter.

Again, in Acts 18:18, Paul himself takes a vow, shaving his head, not of necessity but because he desired to undergo a spiritual discipline for his own good.

On one of his visits to Jerusalem, he came to see James, the Lord's brother and head of the Jerusalem Church. James pointed out that there were thousands of Jews who had received Jesus as Messiah, but continued in their Temple worship and religious ritual. They had heard rumors that Paul taught the Jews in the Gentile world to turn their back on Moses. Therefore, to put the rumor to rest, James suggested Paul undergo ritual purification in the Temple along with four men undergoing that ritual at the time - even paying their fee (or making their offering). Paul did. From these instances, we can see how consistent the words of our text are with the actual conduct of the Apostle.

All things to all people in order to win some.

Such flexibility is remarkable and it is rare, especially in religion. We all get ideologized bias, whether in religion, politics, economics, or whatever field of discourse we engage in. Paul's flexibility was founded on his freedom and his freedom flowed out of his experience of grace.

Paul was set free by grace. Christ died and rose again. Paul died with Christ. Paul rose with Christ. Paul was free of every human structure, ritual, law, custom and institution – he was a slave to Jesus Christ and that enslaving was perfect freedom. The freedom of grace relativized every other duty or claim upon him.

Paul never wavered from the Gospel as it had been revealed to him and in his Galatian letter he insists it was given him by revelation. On the principle of grace, Paul would not compromise. He took on Peter and admonished Barnabas when they withdrew from Gentiles at table when Jewish Christian leaders from Jerusalem arrived in Galatia. He stood on the grace principle. But standing there, he was able to move with freedom, to deal with flexibility. His overriding passion was not his own ease or power or success but the setting of all persons free, free from religious superstition and constitutional oppression, from the manipulations of religious or political leaders, free to become fully human, fully alive in the grace of Jesus Christ.

Thus he remained a person of passion and deep commitment, but now to the one thing needful – the gospel of grace – that turned him from a hardnosed fanatic to a gracious apostle of Jesus Christ.

Amen.