

Series: Legalism. License. Liberty!
Message Title: ***The Tragedy of Spiritual Desertion***
Date: Sunday, September 17, 2017
Scripture: Galatians 1:6-10
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Location: Warren Baptist Church, Augusta, GA

Introduction

Amid all the volatile and eventful headlines and stories of recent weeks, another quieter, yet featured story has been unfolding in military court. This story involves the actions of U.S. Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl. In 2009, he walked off his post in Afghanistan, was captured by the Taliban, and was held until 2014, in exchange for five Taliban members held at Guantanamo Bay.

The circumstances surrounding the disappearance of Sgt. Bergdahl have created a series of reactions and responses still being sorted out and prosecuted today. On March 3, 2015, the U.S. military charged Bergdahl with one count each of desertion with intent to shirk important or hazardous duty, and misbehavior before the enemy by endangering the safety of a command, unit or place.

This matter is currently being reviewed by a military judge and a future sentence of judgment will come with a trial in October.

Desertion is one of the greatest acts of criminal intent in the military. It is costly and can be deadly. It is a serious matter, but desertion is not limited to military service:

Business: “Zombie Properties” in Real Estate

Marital: When someone absences the responsibilities and obligations of marriage through neglect, destructive behavior (alcohol, drugs, abuse) or adultery.

Parental: Men produce children without intent of fathering. Women neglect children for attention and affection of men. Parents become so self-focused, they fail to care for children. Foster care and orphan crisis is not just tragedy; often it an intentional act of irresponsibility.

Desertion = to forsake or leave one’s duty or obligation; to fail (someone) at a time of need

For us today, the matter of desertion is one of great significance. We live in days when many

doubt truth and turn away from the faith. For this reason, there is a battle that rages in every generation to “contend for the faith.”

“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 3-4 ESV).

Part of our mission as a church is to *contend*. This is an athletic term to help us develop spiritual discipline, depth and muscle in order to stand and withstand the assaults and attacks of error and unbelief.

Spiritual desertion occurs when people move away from the truth of God’s Word or when they distort and deny the testimony of faith in Jesus Christ. This is a great reality we battle in every generation—those who fall away from the truth of the gospel. False teachers, unbelieving influences, moral failures and

shallow roots often combine to result in spiritual desertion.

For this reason, Paul begins the letter to the churches in Galatia, calling them back. As we begin this letter again, we are immediately met with Paul's indignation rather than an extended salutation. We meet his astonishment and feel his anguish. The people were switching loyalties.

For example, imagine going to a UGA game with your college roommate who cheers "Go Dawgs!" for Georgia. Then the following week, the roommate shows up at a game between Georgia and Florida with a gator shirt, hat and moving arms like a chomp. "What are you doing?" you might think. You are contending for loyalty.

Spiritual desertion occurs in life for many reasons:

- Peter—fear and intimidation of being found out as a Christ-follower. Peter ran away. "And again he [Peter] denied it with an oath: 'I do not know the Man'" (Matthew 26:72 ESV).

- Demas (a co-laborer of Paul) let the love of the world draw him back from full spiritual devotion to Christ. “Do your best to come to me [Paul] soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia” (2 Timothy 4:9-10 ESV).

- Church at Ephesus—loss of first love (emotional faith replaces relational faith).
“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first” (Revelation 2:4 ESV).

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As

we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:3-10 ESV).

The tense of the verb here indicates the action is not final and Paul is fighting, contending for the faith of the Galatian believers. At the beginning, Paul is contending!



Spiritual Desertion Takes Place on Three Fronts:

1. Deserting the Person of the Gospel— Christ

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the

gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:6-7 ESV).

It is the gospel rooted in the person and work of Jesus Christ. To turn from the gospel—to distort the gospel—is to desert the person of Christ. It is the paramount of unfaithfulness in a relationship.

... “who gave Himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Galatians 1:4 ESV).

Paul describes Christ as the One who “gave HIMSELF for our sins”. The entire message and mission of the gospel surrounds the saving work of Christ. There is nothing more vital than for us to get the gospel right.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 ESV).

“For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21 ESV).

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9 ESV).

The gospel is the overwhelming, liberating and life-changing truth of God’s gracious forgiveness and acceptance for us through His Son, Jesus Christ—apart from our own efforts or good works.

The Galatians weren’t deserting propositions or even theological positions (though they were), but they were abandoning loyalty to God in Jesus Christ.

To taint, dilute or trivialize the gospel is to devalue and deny Christ. It is sad that so many in the surroundings of religion—Christian religion—miss Christ. Many of you here today can probably attest to a religious background or traditions that you honored and followed, but without knowing Christ.

Christ is not someone we know about; He is someone we know, love and serve.

“Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?” (Galatians 4:8-9 ESV).

To know Christ is life’s greatest joy, hope, peace and security.

“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ... that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:7-8,10-11 ESV).

Do you have a passion to know Christ? Are you pursuing the knowledge of Christ as a treasure in your life? Spiritual desertion

comes near when we are caught up in rituals, activities and practices that may be “Christian”, but we are void of affection and devotion to Christ.

“The gospel is not just supposed to be our ticket into heaven, it is to be an entirely new basis of how we relate to God, ourselves and others. It is the source from which everything else flows... the goal of the gospel is not just that we pass some kind of test by accurately recounting the importance of Jesus. The goal of the gospel is to produce a type of people consumed with passion for God and love for others... Being converted to Jesus is not just about learning to obey some rules. Being converted to Jesus is learning to so adore God that we would gladly renounce everything we have to follow Him.”

—J.D. Greear

2. Deserting the Principle of the Gospel—Grace

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are

some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:6-7 ESV).

"distorted grace" = failing to see how great our need is for grace and to think we could somehow deliver ourselves from the aggressive and destructive power of sin

We never move beyond grace, but these people were moving on and turning back to the law. They were becoming "spiritual turncoats".

God is gracious to undeserving sinners. All of us have to admit sin and all need to be saved. For all the problems of our day, one of the most ugly and evil is the race problem. But our greatest ill in society is not a *skin* problem, it is a *sin* problem. It takes the blood of Christ to save us all.

"The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed than we ever dared believe, yet at the same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope."

—Timothy Keller

Paul was speaking to a group of Jews who had spent years being enslaved to the traditions of the law. He knew the system well as he was the epitome of this system.

“And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers” (Galatians 1:14 ESV).

Paul was well acquainted with religious performance. He was a performer, but not a worshiper. Guilt can turn us into religious performers, but grace is what makes us worshipers.

*Come, thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount I'm fixed upon it
Mount of God's redeeming love.*

*Oh, to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,*

*Bind my wandering heart to Thee:
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it;
Seal it for Thy courts above.*
—Robert Robinson

How could you walk away from the security, liberty and life this message brings? Why would you?

For many, spiritual insecurity has become a way of life. They keep “up-ing” the performance without ever knowing whether they have done “enough” for God. Luther expressed this as we saw last week. He was a monk who resented God because his performance did not deepen love for God.

“different” = the idea of flipping back to reverse current direction. *heteros* = different kind. *allos* = another of the same kind.

“accursed” = *anathema*, judged by God—damnation. There is nothing more dangerous than the church losing sight of the gospel, and tolerating teaching and practice that contradicts the gospel.

It was this firm conviction that caused Luther to declare, "Here I stand, so help me God, I can do no other." This is why grace alone (*sola gratia*) and faith alone (*sola fide*) were two of the five foundational truths of the Protestant Reformation.

The Apostle Paul challenged, confronted and called the people back from their leaning toward the desertion of the principle of grace. All of the promptings of the Christian life in obedience are promptings of gratitude toward grace: baptism, giving, service, witness, etc.

"Faith in the gospel re-structures our motivations, our self-understanding and identity, and our view of the world. Behavioral compliance to rules without heart-change will be superficial and fleeting. The gospel changes your heart." —Timothy Keller

When we know and experience this, life and faith are tethered and renewed by the principle of grace working in us.

3. Deserting the Power of the Gospel—Freedom

... “who gave Himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Galatians 1:4 ESV).

The gospel of Christ has the power to deliver us from this present evil age. Literally, the gospel has the power to change your life—here, now, today.

This is why Paul was so resistant and resolved because they were leaning back to reliance on human strength instead of divine power.

Think of Moses and Israel after the Red Sea. Moses leaves the people and goes to Mt. Sinai.

Pre-Exodus: great oppression, Israelites were slaves in Egypt, God raises up Moses and leads them out. Why? To lead them to a new life, new land, but also to give them a new law—a new standard of life. The release is an incredible action of God for them. Passover (Exodus 12)—God redeems! Red Sea—God

delivers! God brought them out to bring them In!

Once at the foot of Mt. Sinai, Moses goes up to meet God and get God's "perfect ten".

We learn in Exodus 32, Moses comes down ready to move them forward only to find them leaning backward—golden calf. The people had deserted their Redeemer. Instead of embracing their freedom with the Lord, they chose to look back and go back to the life of slavery—dead idols, empty ritual, powerless living. How sad, yet how common.

They disregarded and distorted God's gracious work for them and they deserted the gift of God's redemption, His grace and the freedom provided.

I started today telling you about the unfolding story of Bowe Bergdahl and the charges facing him in these days.

Yet the story of Bowe Bergdahl is not a matter of singular concern; it also involves the life of Chief Petty Officer, James Hatch. He was part of the rescue response, seeking to

find and retrieve Bergdahl. Hatch sustained enemy fire that injured his leg. In the end, this desertion not only cost Bergdahl his honor, it cost Hatch his career.

Someone else paid the price for Bergdahl's captivity and bears the scars. I think you see where I am going here. Jesus, God's Son, was sent from heaven on a search and rescue mission to seek and save a group of "God-deserters"—not for the purpose of prosecution or punishment, but freedom in order that we might experience grace and know the freedom God has provided for all who look to Jesus.

"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:13-14 ESV).