

Series: Legalism. License. Liberty!
Message Title: ***The Confessions of a Religious Fanatic***
Date: Sunday, September 24, 2017
Scripture: Galatians 1:10–2:5
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Location: Warren Baptist Church, Augusta, GA

Introduction

Over the past couple of weeks, we have begun a journey through Paul's letter to the churches in the region of Galatia. Paul's great concern was that those who were introduced to the gospel of grace were beginning to become fanatical concerning the customs, traditions, preferences and practices of the law. They were going backwards spiritually—backsliding—instead of advancing in the faith and freedom of the gospel. And new Christ-followers were becoming religious fanatics.

In the end, their newfound fanaticism—taking the form of legalism and external religious performances—caused them to doubt and dispute the authority of Paul as an apostle.

We probably all have an increasing awareness of living in an age of growing fanaticism, even fury—an "Age of Rage".

My own observations from mainstream and social media (along with daily reports from the public square) present a churning sea of conflict and outrage leading to open injury through anger, rage and violence. For some, fanatical viewpoints are of greater value than human lives.

Far beyond becoming a society of tolerant diversity, we are increasingly becoming a world filled with intolerant fanatics. I, for one, believe fanaticism is both highly visible, even fashionable in our day.

In the end, we are living in a world teeming with fanaticism and it is easy for you and for me to be seen as simply one of many religious fanatics—maybe, the worst of all.

So what is a fanatic?

fa·nat·ic *noun*

• a person filled with excessive and single-minded zeal, especially for an extreme religious or political cause, **Synonyms:** *zealot, extremist, militant, dogmatist, devotee, adherent*

- a person with an obsessive interest in and enthusiasm for something, especially an activity—“a fitness fanatic”

Our word, *fan*, is simply an abbreviated version of the word, *fanatic*. I may be speaking to a group of people (who given their varied sports' persuasions) could all be classified as fanatics. But the key is not whether we can be called *fanatics*, but who and what defines the devotion and direction of our lives.

“For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me **is not man’s gospel**. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. 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. But when He who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son to me, in order that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not

immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus” (Galatians 1:11-17 ESV).

Paul was confident and convinced that what had happened in his own life was more than a shift in the fanaticism that had characterized him prior to his encounter with Christ; it was something so transformative that it redefined his life as a follower of Christ.

It would appear that Paul (using his own testimony and life story) provides us with a means of measure by outlining a series of before and after images of his life and faith in Christ.

Let’s trace this transformation.



Religious Fanatics vs. Christ Followers

What’s the difference?

Performance-Driven vs. Grace-Captured

For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. 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 1:13-14 ESV).

Paul openly describes his former life as one of religious performance. How can I present myself as good, righteous and moral?

For many, religion is a means of morality. But let me remind you today that “While morality can keep you out of jail, it cannot keep you out of hell. If morality could save you then, Jesus did not need to die... Only perfectly righteous people, to people who are merely moral, can go to heaven.” —Tony Merida

God’s plan and purpose in salvation are not to make us moral; it is to give us life, new life motivated by and directed toward one aim—pleasing God, not man.

What was the cause of this transformation from morality and religious fanaticism to becoming an authentic Christ-follower? Grace.

“But when He who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son to me, in order that I might preach Him among the Gentiles” (Galatians 1:15-16a ESV).

This is the foundation of biblical Christianity. It is grace that reveals God’s unmerited favor and results in creating new life, new love, new law and new leadership in our lives. Why? We are sinners!

“The startling truth of Christianity is that God’s pleasure is not based on our performance... God’s favor is free... it’s based on His performance—Christ for us.”

—Tony Merida

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works,

which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10 ESV).

All of grace. This was the first and most foundational cry of the Protestant Reformation. People were living in days with the fanaticism of a state church of Rome that was calling for morality, creating guilt, selling indulgences and profiting from fear by teaching salvation based on human merit, effort, and performance. All this simply leads to zealous, religious fanaticism. *Sola gratia* = Grace alone. Grace humbles, recovers and reshapes life toward the pleasure of God.

“For am I [Paul] 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 1:10 ESV).

This was the Apostle Paul’s own life and desire for the Galatian believers.

The greatest evidence of an experience of grace is an effectual calling that changes the way you are living—a change in direction and desire to live to please God, not man.

It is a response of gratitude flowing out of a recognition of unworthiness because of God's initiative of goodness, kindness and mercy toward us.

"This whole section flows out of the last three words of verse 11: 'not man's gospel.' Why are those words there? Because the real gospel is counterintuitive. It is not what we expect. It is not what we are comfortable with. The message, 'Hey you rotten sinners, stop it! Get your act together!' makes total sense to us. But the message of divine grace, those sacred words from the cross, 'it is finished'—that's surprising." —Ray Ortland

Nothing so transforms the motivations and actions of a person's life as grace. God gave the punishment of our sin to Christ that we might have and know the acceptance and approval of God. Is God calling in your heart today? Will you answer the call to follow Christ?

God makes bad people good, not by their moral effort, but through His sovereign work of grace. Paul (like everyone) needed grace.

“For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how **I** persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. 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 1:13-14 ESV). Notice Paul’s use of *my* and *I*. But then Paul was captured by the grace of God:

“**But God**, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4-5 ESV).

Traditions vs. Truth

“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... Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you” (Galatians 1:14; 2:4-5 ESV).

It is amazing how many times practices and preferences become the cause of our religious zeal rather than the truth of God's Word.

Paul thought he was right and righteous. He was sincere, but sincerely wrong.

One of my greatest challenges to you is not to think preferentially, denominationally, ritually, socially, politically or morally, but to think BIBLICALLY.

"For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I **received** it through a revelation of Jesus Christ... was pleased to **reveal** His Son to me, in order that I might preach Him among the Gentiles" (Galatians 1:12, 16 ESV).

We do not live by tradition, but by direct revelation of God through His Word. This is why the authority of Scripture is vital in every generation.

What is the nature of Scripture?

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8 ESV). —truth, not trending

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17 ESV) —breath of God that gives life to men.

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12 ESV) —confrontational, counter-cultural truth.

This must be our greatest conviction and concern within the church. The forms and practices of former generations will not suffice for the challenges and needs of our mission today.

Every generation struggles with a need to “add” to the gospel.

Christianity + psychology, healing, success, veganism, environmentalism, political, activism, tolerance, just cause. It is easy to pick-up baggage. These are not bad things; they are just not necessary.

It is easy to let our times, our tastes, our patterns, our styles, our structures, etc. all become concerns of keeping tradition and pleasing men rather than pursuing the mission of God.

We end up drawn to many things—our passions, causes, routines, trends... even our problems and needs.

“If you’re not grounded in the Word of God, you’re going to become a religious fanatic of some kind.” —Andrew Skelton

What are things we tend to add to the gospel? What traditions do we “own” that become obstacles for others to come to Christ?

“Whatever your heart clings to, confides in—that is really your God.” —Martin Luther

What are we practicing, trusting and maintaining other than Jesus to gain acceptance and approval, to have security and significance, to find meaning and purpose?

Violence vs. Service

“For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. 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. But when He who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son to me, in order that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone” (Galatians 1:13-16 ESV).

Paul was no longer driven by self-indulging, self-approving and self-demanding attitudes, but rather, one reflected in a desire to be little that Christ may be much. From I, me, my... to Him!

As we address and confront the changing trends of culture, it is easy to make our mission field our battlefield. God has put us in this world to declare and reveal His glory in our lives.

“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16 ESV).

Don't let the same attitudes of anger, animosity, rage and even violence become evident in you. No one could have lived in a more resistant culture or carried a more counter-cultural message to both the Jew and the Gentile than Paul.

The Jews saw Paul as indulgent because he refused their religious rituals and the Gentiles saw Paul as insolent because he challenged their immoral lifestyles.

We don't have to coerce people to believe; we simply need to proclaim that our God is mighty to save and show the power of that salvation in our daily lives.

The wrath of man does not work the righteousness of God, but God's grace and power makes ungodly, unholy, rebellious people righteous.

“Paul understood that the messenger must embody the message. Paul understood that he is himself a living argument for ‘not man’s gospel.’ He is a living surprise, because he really represents God’s counter-intuitive grace. When we see the gospel in a person, then we really see it, we can touch it, we can understand it as more than an argument.”

—Martin Luther

What many need in our world today is an encounter with a grace-captured believer. Then, and only then, does the faith become more than propositional; it becomes incarnational.

Paul focused on his new identity in Christ and tethers it to the mission of Christ, the message of the gospel

... “was pleased to reveal His Son to me, in order that **I might preach Him** [Christ] among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus” (Galatians 1:16-17 ESV).

“The gospel came to you because it was heading to someone else. God never intended for your salvation to be an end, but a beginning.” —Robby Gallaty

Paul got it.

“And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, ‘He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.’ **And they glorified God because of me**” (Galatians 1:22-24 ESV).

I want to be someone who exhibits a life transformed by His grace. Don't you? Admittedly, living in light of a new identity in Christ is not easy. It takes time, perseverance, faithfulness, and continual awareness. We all are in need of grace today as we have ever been. Our default mode will always be away from grace and toward ourselves, our preferences and our traditions.

What we do together here at WBC must be to further the gospel. Every service of worship is not just an option; it is a mission post for reaching, teaching, equipping and engaging people in the gospel.

It is like left-handed living for me since I am right-handed! I want to be selfish, demeaning, demanding and controlling of others, but Christ calls me to selfless service and sacrifice. This is the evidence of an authentic Christ-follower: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5 ESV).

Fear vs. Freedom

"Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you" (Galatians 2:4-5 ESV).

One of the greatest joys of growth and walk with Christ has been to learn and know of the blessing of right standing with God that remains not because of my goodness, but His grace.

The first major controversy in church history in Acts 15:6-21 (Jerusalem Council) had to

do with practices and procedures that were disputed between Jewish believers and Gentiles.

For years there was a great distance between Jews and Gentiles, but Jesus broke down the wall—no system, no intermediaries, no special class of priests. Jesus opened the door of salvation for all who believed, but fanaticism created controversy and division: Do you have to be Jewish in tradition once you become Christian in faith? Paul went to Jerusalem, met with the other apostles and hammered out *sola gratia*.

In Galatians 2:4, Paul speaks of those who seek to “spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus.” What does this mean?

In every age, there are those who attempt to find weaknesses in the gospel of grace and attempt to add measures of good works.

Freedom/liberty in Christ is what releases us from the constraints of fanaticism. Only when we come under the authority of Christ do we know freedom. As long as we seek to add and amass good works, we live in futility and fear.

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1 ESV).

This is why we celebrate the gospel. This is why we “contend for the gospel”. This is why we cling to the gospel. The gospel liberates us from fear, fanaticism, fatigue, frustration and failure. The gospel empowers us for life!

“The gospel is not good advice from man; it is good news from God. Rejoice in the gospel. In Christ, you find what your heart has always longed to find. No other love is this great. No other hope is this secure. No other forgiveness is this complete. No other joy is this deep. No other freedom is this liberating. No other peace is this sweet. All of it is found in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”

—Tony Merida

Are you a religious fanatic or a Christ-follower? Do you know the hope of the gospel and its transforming power—the freedom of Christ—or are you still puttering around in your weak attempt to do better and liberate your soul? Jesus is calling— “Follow Me!”