

SENSIBLE FANATICISM

by Ray C. Stedman

As the Apostle Paul traveled about the Roman Empire, we learn from Scripture that he was frequently accused of being crazy. People heard his testimony of his remarkable experience on the Damascus Road, they saw his dedication and his commitment to life which took him away from comforts and pleasures, etc., and they said he was crazy. In fact, one Roman governor recorded in the book of Acts, Porcius Festus, said to his face one day, "Paul, you are mad; your great learning is turning you mad," {cf, Acts 26:24 RSV}. But the apostle did not seem to mind this. Perhaps he remembered that the Gospels tell us there was an occasion when the mother and brothers of Jesus came to take him home, because, they said, "He is beside himself.' He is crazy," {cf, Matt 12:46-48, Mark 3:21 }.

We seem generously supplied today, especially in this part of the country, with a wide variety of kooks, weirdos and oddballs, of steely-eyed fanatics with long forefingers, full of passionate speeches. In fact, California has now earned the reputation of the weirdo capital of the world. They all flock here, especially in the winter months. Since many of them claim to be Christians, it raises the question of whether the early Christians really were like that. Do you have to be a fanatic to be a Christian?

Let us listen to the Apostle Paul's description of his own life, found here in Chapter 6 of Second Corinthians, beginning with Verse 3, and see what he describes his dedicated life to be like.

We put no obstacle in any one's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; by purity knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, get always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. {2 Cor 6:3-10 RSV }

Is that fanaticism? If it is, I feel like the great English preacher, Charles Spurgeon, who, when he was told that Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road was really caused by a fit of epilepsy, said, "Oh, blessed epilepsy! Would that every man in London could experience epilepsy like that!" So if this is fanaticism, then I say, "Would that every one of us were fanatics like this!"

What a magnificent description of a God-honoring life! What a marvelous pattern is held before us in order that we might respond to Paul's plea, which we looked at last week, "receive not the grace of God in vain," {cf, 2 Cor 6:1b RSV}. Here is what the "ministry of reconciliation" {cf, 2 Cor 5:18, ff}, which he described in the passage last week, will really look like when it is lived out to the full.

You and I may fall far short of a description like this. I feel I do. But though we may not equal in degree the way the apostle lived, we are all called to be like this in kind, at least.

Let me break up this passage for you in its divisions so you can see what I mean:

1. Paul begins in Verse 3 by showing how careful he is before men. That is what the ministry of reconciliation that God has given to you and to me is going to require.
2. Then, in Verses 4-7, the apostle shows us how his ministry is approved by God.
3. Finally, in Verses 8-10, in this great series of paradoxes, he reveals how his life confounds and

confuses the world, just as your life and mine today is called on to confound and confuse the world in which we live so that people are unable to explain us by the normal measurements of life.

Let us come back now to Verse 3, where Paul shows us how careful his ministry is before men:

We put no obstacle in any one's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry.
{2 Cor 6:3 RSV}

It is a very important thing that we have an awareness of what we look like to others, that we are careful not to allow anything in our lives to turn someone off from becoming a Christian. Paul lived continually with that objective in view, so that he says, "no fault may be found with our ministry."

Now people did find fault with him, and plenty of it. As we learn in this very section, he was accused of being a deceiver, of being a phony, false apostle, of being filled with ambition, pride, and sarcasm. So he was accused of many things. But the point he is making here is that none of them stuck, because his own conscience cleared him. He knew in his heart that these were false accusations, that he had done nothing, had "put no obstacle in any one's way," lest they should be hindered in coming to Christ. This is a tremendously noteworthy thing about the Apostle Paul.

There is a passage in First Thessalonians that is somewhat similar to this:

For our appeal does not spring from error or uncleanness, nor is it made with guile; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please men, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never used either words of flattery, as you know, or a cloak for greed, as God is witness; nor did we seek glory from men, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.
{1 Th 2:3-8 RSV}

As this great apostle traveled about from place to place, the first thing he took care to see was that there was no offense allowed to remain in his life that would stumble someone else.

One of the saddest things about our day is the number of prominent Christian leaders who have allowed offensive obstacles to come into their lives that have wrecked their reputation as Christians and set them aside from the gospel's ministry.

Now, we see and hear these about prominent people, but we have to remember that every one of us is in this place too. People who know we are Christians are looking at us all the time to see how we behave. Paul lived in this continual awareness that he was being examined by men, as though he were on stage and everybody was watching him. Therefore, he is very careful to see there is no fault found in his ministry.

The second category here is his sense of approval before God, Verse 4:

... but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance,
{2 Cor 6:4a RSV}

Endurance is the key there. God, looking upon Paul's life, is pleased and glorified by the fact that no matter what happens to him he sticks with it. He endures; that is the point.

This word literally means to "stay under the pressure." We all feel pressure -- pressure to give in here, to give up there, pressure to go along with something. But the mark of a Christian who has learned how to walk with God is that he stays under the pressure; he does not quit. The modern term, "hang in there," expresses exactly what this verse means -- "Just hang in there and don't quit until you are triumphant."

There were certain pressures Paul goes on to list here, in groups of threes, which fall into three categories.

First, there were tough circumstances:

... **afflictions, hardships, calamities, ... {2 Cor 6:4b RSV}**

Afflictions are the normal problems we face. The literal word is "distresses." What distresses you, makes you unhappy and irritates you? This is the idea. Are you afflicted right now? Are you under some pressure of circumstances that you do not like? That is what Paul is talking about. It can be financial problems, in-law problems, disappointment of some sort, the threat of physical illness, whatever.

Then there were hardships. That is a word that really means "necessities," things you cannot help, things you did not ask for but you cannot get away from. Do you have some of those? It may be that somebody has taken ill and you are his only surviving relative. You have the responsibility to help and you do not like it because it undercuts all your plans. That is a necessity laid upon you. Sometimes some of the physical ailments and handicaps you face are necessities. There is nothing you can do about them; you have to live with them.

I was reading this week about Fanny Crosby, that marvelous writer of many of our hymns, who lived to be 95 years old. She was blind all her life, but what a cheerful spirit she had, reflected in her great hymns. When she was 8 years old she wrote,

Oh, what a happy child I am
Although I cannot see,
I am determined that in this world
Contented I will be.
How many blessings I enjoy
That other people don't.
To weep and sigh because I'm blind
I cannot and I won't.

On her grave in Bridgeport, Conn., there is a simple little headstone with the name "Aunt Fanny," and these words,

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine.
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine.

That is dealing with necessities in a cheerful spirit, which Paul also did.

Then he speaks of calamities. The word is "narrow places," where life kind of presses in on you and you do not see any way out at all. But in all of these Paul says he hung in there, and, thus, glorified God. He did not quit; he stayed with it; he endured.

Not only were there tough circumstances, but there was tough opposition that he faced. Listen to this:

... **beatings, imprisonments, tumults, ... {2 Cor 6:5a RSV}**

A little later on in this very letter {i.e., 2 Cor 11:23-27}, he tells us that up to this time there were five occasions when he had been beaten with 39 stripes. So there were 195 stripes he had already felt. Three times he had been beaten with rods, sticks at least an inch or more thick laid on his back. He had been stoned once in the city of Lystra and left for dead. All this he had already endured, but he had hung in there despite that.

I feel very inadequate when I read an account like this. I think one good whipping would wipe me out. But Paul had many of these beatings.

Then there were imprisonments. According to Clement of Rome, who wrote just a few short years after Paul died, Paul had been in prison seven different times in his life, although we only have three of those times recorded in the Scriptures. That is a hard thing for the spirit to bear -- an active, vigorous man like this locked up and shut up. But it did not make him quit, that is the point. He hung in there.

There were tumults, mobs, Paul says.

We have been watching on television the mobs raging around our Embassy in Tehran. There is nothing more frightening than the feeling that you are about to be set upon by a mob.

I have not been attacked by one, but I have been close to it at times. It is a frightening thing to feel that you are going to be attacked by overwhelming numbers and that no one can help you. Paul faced those situations.

Then there were certain commitments that he had already undertaken. He calls them,

... labors, watchings, hungers; {cf, 2 Cor 6:5b RSV}

These are things he chose for himself. His work of preaching and of making tents at night so he could feed himself and those who were with him oftentimes meant long nights of sleeplessness and many missed meals because he was trying to keep active and to pay his expenses by his labors. He did not have to do this but he chose to because it was part of his deep drive of commitment to get the "good news" out to those around.

So in these three categories, tough circumstances, tough opposition, and tough commitments, he faced continual conditions of pressure. Yet he never quit.

This is the thing that challenges us in these easygoing days of ours. I find so many want to quit, to throw in the towel, to give up when God sends them into tough circumstances. But Paul did not. That is what was God-pleasing and God-honoring about his experiences. This is what made him "approved" by God.

Not only did he face these conditions, but in the midst of them there was a certain character that he displayed:

... by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; {2 Cor 6:6-7a RSV}

There are two divisions here, each containing four parts. The first four are consistent qualities of the apostle's life.

First, there was purity. Isn't it amazing that he puts that first? Yet it is pertinent to us, because he lived in days of widespread immorality, just like ours. He had to travel and live in the midst of a people given over to the pursuit of sexual immorality, yet he says he was careful to see that his mind and his thoughts were pure. It indicates that there was no giving way to hanky-panky whenever he went into a strange city by himself. He never said to himself, "Now's the chance to do some of the things I have been wanting to do, but was afraid somebody might hear about." No, wherever he went he was guarded and kept by the conviction that he was related to and possessed by the Holy One. Therefore, he kept his mind pure and his thoughts correct and judged the temptations to evil in his life.

The second quality was knowledge. That is very important. What enabled him, in a sense, to be pure was the fact that he constantly "renewed his mind" {Rom 12:2b RSV}, as he puts it in Romans 12. His mind was renewed by the Holy Spirit as he reminded himself of the way God looks at life.

In our forum after the first service this morning we were discussing,

1. How do you keep yourself pure, and
2. How do you face life as a Christian

in this day and age. We concluded that the only answer is that you deliberately remind yourself of what the Word of God teaches about life. You have to renew your mind every morning so that you look at yourself, and life, and those around you as God sees them. It is a deliberate effort not to drift along as the world does, reflecting all the attitudes of those around, but deliberately choosing to think rightly about life.

Then there was forbearance. That simply means long-suffering, patience, but particularly patience with other

people. It is always interesting how people get to us, how hard it is to keep putting up with them, forgiving them, and ignoring some of their irritating ways.

I often think of that remark of Mel Trotter, the great evangelist, who used to say, "There are a lot of people I know who are wonderful Christians. I know they are going to go to heaven some day, and, Oh! how I wish they would hurry up!" Do you know people like that? Well, there are some like that. Paul had to face them too, and he had to learn to be patient with them. We all want to be patient, don't we? But we want it given to us right now, and that is what is difficult.

Then there is kindness. That means thoughtfulness, courtesy, warmth in our words and in our tone of voice -- no coldness, no sharp, cutting sarcasm. These four things characterized the apostle: purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness. Those are the qualities he worked at manifesting in his life.

Now, in the next four, he goes deeper -- showing the resources he relied on in order to be like that.

First in the list is the Holy Spirit. When you became a Christian, God gave you the Holy Spirit to live in you, and he came to stay with you.

In John 14 we are told that when the Spirit of truth comes he will "be with you for ever," {John 14:16}. He will never leave you or forsake you. He is your constant companion through life, to be your helper, your strengthener, your comforter, your guide.

This is what Paul relied on more than anything else. You cannot continually manifest this kind of a character unless you are resting upon that kind of a resource. That is why he looked to the Holy Spirit, and that is why he puts him first.

Linked to that is genuine love. I am sure this is a reference to what we saw in an earlier passage where Paul says, "the love of Christ constrains me," {cf, 2 Cor 5:14 KJV}. This is the sense that Jesus was with him too as Lord of Lords and King of Kings, as the One "who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens" (Rev 3:7 {RSV}), as the One who was the companion of the disciples through all the troubles and trials of their years with him.

He is with us too. That is the point. If you read the record of the great saints, they always bear witness to the fact that the thing that held them steady and kept them under the pressure was the continual sense of companionship with the Lord Jesus and the love of Christ for them. This is what enabled them to reflect that same love to others.

The third resource, what is translated here "truthful speech," really should be, "the word of truth," i.e., the Scriptures, the knowledge of how God sees life. I do not see how you can live without studying your Bible. It tells you what the world is really like, what you are up against, and what you are facing in the pressures and dangers and joys around you. That is where Paul spent a great deal of time.

Finally, the power of God. That is his reliance that even in the simple things he did, God was at work. God would make them have impact far beyond what could ordinarily be expected. This is always the secret of a God-honored life. It has impact that has tremendous power to change people, power coming from God working with us, resurrection power going beyond anything we can anticipate.

The third area of his approval before God is the conflict that he wages:

... with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. {2 Cor 6:7b-8a RSV}

In Chapter 10 he speaks of these weapons of righteousness, saying they are not ordinary, human plans and programs. He confronted, as we must confront, some of the social injustices of our day -- the racial strife, the drug traffic, the erosion of morals, the breakdown of the home, the rise of crime, the terrible danger from international warfare.

What do you do about these things? Paul says he came at them with "weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left." There is some disagreement as to what that means. Personally, I think it means the public life, which the right hand stood for, and the private life, which the left hand symbolized. Some take it to be weapons of offense on the right and defense on the left. But whatever it may mean, it indicates that he was aware that he was in a sharp spiritual combat; and he did not employ ordinary pressure tactics and legislative corrections, etc., though these have their place. He used prayer and faith and love and righteous behavior as the weapons by which he attacked the problems around him. And he did it in honor and dishonor, that is, whether he was popular or unpopular.

I have been reading a new book on the life of Billy Graham, written not by a believer, but by an unbeliever. The writer is very skillful and capable. It is a joy to read his descriptive powers, but one thing becomes very clear. Though he has great respect for Billy Graham as a person, and though he appreciates that he has become a worldwide celebrity, nevertheless he has very little good to say about his message or what he is doing. The impact of the book is that Billy Graham has been making a kind of fool of himself, preaching a message that really deceives people and plays psychological tricks on them.

It is interesting to see that Billy Graham is coming now under this kind of attack. Once he was widely acclaimed all over the world, hardly any voices raised against him, but now he is beginning to be attacked more and more.

Paul was like that. Whether he was popular or unpopular, it did not make any difference, he said; whether he had honor or dishonor, or whether he was in ill repute or good repute. "Honor" is what people say to your face; "reputation" is what they say behind your back. But Paul says it does not make any difference. In all this he says his life is pleasing to God because it is by faith. He did not count on himself; he was not trying to make a big display before others; he had no personal ambitions. It was God at work in him.

Then he closes with this wonderful series of contrasts. I do not even need to comment on them, they are so self-evident:

We are treated as impostors, {2 Cor 6:8b RSV}

Some were calling him a false apostle because he was not one of the twelve.

... and yet are true; as unknown, {2 Cor 6:8c-9a RSV}

Once there was a time when everybody had heard of Saul of Tarsus. He was an up-and-coming young Pharisee who was making a name for himself. But that is all gone now. Nobody ever hears of Paul the Apostle. No television cameras follow him around; no reporters write up all his meetings. He is unknown, and yet known in heaven, known throughout the universe.

... and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; {2 Cor 6:9b RSV}

How many times people must have spread the word, "Well, poor Paul is gone. They killed him over there in Lystra." But to everybody's amazement he shows up again. He keeps returning, keeps reappearing on the scene despite all the dangers and trials he faced.

... as punished, and yet not killed; {2 Cor 6:9c RSV}

That is a record of God's chastening upon him. There were times when, as a loving father, God chastened the apostle, as he chastens us. Yet Paul says, "He doesn't wipe me out. He loves me. Though I am chastened I am not eliminated."

... as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. {2 Cor 6:10 RSV}

What a magnificent life!

I know that you feel, as I do, about it that there is not much that we seem to measure up to in this regard. But the thing that glorifies God is that whatever it is we are up against, no matter how tough it may be, it is hanging in there in dependence on God to see us through that wins the crown and wins the prize. We are all in that race.

I want to close with these words from A. W. Tozer, that rugged old prophet from Chicago. He says:

A real Christian is an odd number anyway. He feels supreme love for one whom he has never seen; talks familiarly every day to someone he cannot see; expects to go to heaven on the virtue of another; empties himself in order to be full; admits he is wrong so he can be declared right; goes down in order to get up; is strongest when he is weakest; richest when he is poorest; and happiest when he feels the worst. He dies so he can live; forsakes in order to have; gives away so he can keep; sees the invisible, hears the inaudible, and knows that which passes knowledge. The man who has met God is not looking for anything; he has found it. He is not searching for light, for upon him the light has already shined. His certainty may seem bigoted, but his assurance is that of one who knows by experience his religion is not hearsay. He is not a copy, not a facsimile. He is an original from the hand of the Holy Spirit.

That is the life that wins, the "ministry of reconciliation" in action.

May God grant that we will see that we are called to be that in this day and hour.

There is no Apostle Paul in the 20th century. There is you and me, and our lives lived out in these times. Yet the same witness and the same testimony is to be ours before a lost world.

Prayer

Thank you, Heavenly Father, for the witness of this record of the great apostle as he lived through the pressures and the calamities of his own time. Grant to us who live in similar times and under similar pressures that we may see that we glorify God not in the great, spectacular, dashing displays of supernatural wisdom or power, but in the steady daily yielding of our lives in the home, in the family circle, among our friends, manifesting a character of purity, of knowledge, of patience, and of kindness. We thank you, Lord, and ask that you will make us that by the power of the Holy Spirit. In Jesus name, Amen.

OUTLINE OF 2 CORINTHIANS 5:18-6:10

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 - (b) unknown yet well known
 - (c) dying yet living
 - (d) chastened yet not killed
 - (e) sorrowful yet rejoicing
 - (f) poor yet enriching
 - (g) having nothing yet owning all
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