

GALATIANS 2

REAL: The Search for Authentic Faith (Part 2)

If you were with us last week, then you know we've started to name the fact that you and I are living in a complex and confusing time. Every day we're being confronted by phishing scams and fake news and ChatGPT and artificial food and cosmetic surgery and computer-generated virtual worlds and people like George Santos. Just figuring out what is REAL and what isn't is starting to be a full-time job.

I know we've got some kids with us today who have exceptional Reality-Detecting Ability. And as all of us are kids-at-heart, tell me what you make of these images. **[#Floating Ship]** Is that ship in the clouds for REAL? It actually is. Some fog just cleared out there in the bay. **[#Pilot]** How about this creative use of a selfie stick? Did some pilot actually do that? Nope! That's a fake. **[#Castle]** Do you suppose you might be able to rent this AirBNB some day? Does that place really exist? I'm sorry; NOT real. **[#LionMRI]** Who thinks that maybe this lion just needed an MRI? That *could* be real, right? It is! I hope the vets figured out Leo's problem. **[#TwoField]** Or what about this beautiful rural scene? Is that photoshopped or an actual picture? It's a real place in southern France.

You all did pretty well, but it is hard to get reality right without a little help sometimes. I think that's part of why the most famous follower of Jesus – the man we call the Apostle Paul – wrote the letter he did that we call GALATIANS. As our preachers last week described, Galatia was a region in what would be north-central Turkey today, a place where there were numerous small communities of Christians – just as there are numerous smaller churches all around the western suburbs today. Like us now, the Jesus-followers of Galatia were trying to work out their faith amidst the complicated forces and competing belief systems of their time. So Paul writes this letter to help define for them what REAL Christianity was about and to distinguish the authentic picture from fake or doctored images of the faith.

At the end of chapter 1 of his letter, Paul describes some of the significant places he visited along his spiritual journey. We pick up the story in chapter 2 where Paul says: **Then fourteen years later I went back to Jerusalem again... (Galatians 2:1).** There is a universe of meaning in that phrase – “**I went back to Jerusalem again...**” that I want to unpack so we can appreciate the rest of this chapter.

You may recall that before he was the famous Christian Apostle Paul, this man was the infamous Christian-Killer Saul. Saul had been a Jewish fundamentalist who saw followers of Jesus as dangerous disruptors who were infecting Judaism with the virus of a false belief system. In Acts chapter 9, however, Saul describes how, while he was on the road to Damascus to arrest and kill more Christians, Jesus met him. Jesus literally

and figuratively knocked Saul off his high horse, convincing him that it was actually Saul who was operating with a fake picture of what God wanted from people and it was the followers of Jesus who were living an authentic faith.

Fourteen years before, when Saul (now renamed, Paul) went up to Jerusalem to meet the leaders of the Christian Church, they were understandably very suspicious of him. Some of them even tried to kill him, suspecting that he was just a mole trying to infiltrate the church in order to destroy it. The story reads like a spy or mafia movie! In any event, Acts 9 goes on to say how Paul fled Jerusalem at that time and went off on missionary journeys of his own, following Jesus and spreading his gospel without the official blessing of the Established Church.

Have any of you have had a chance to see the recent hit movie, JESUS REVOLUTION? If not, I highly commend it. It tells the story of a time when in the late 1960's when some drug-using hippies, motorcycle gang-members, and various other outcasts suddenly became interested in Jesus. One of them, a man named Lonnie (represented in the movie by the actor who plays Jesus in THE CHOSEN), walked into a little failing church in the southern California town of Costa Mesa. The church was led by a mostly washed-up pastor named, Chuck Smith (played in the movie by actor Kelsey Grammar – FRASIER to some of us). The real Chuck Smith, I was privileged to meet.

What do you think the reaction of the church was to the arrival of these newcomers? You guessed it. Most of the church members rejected Lonnie and his friends as people without "authentic faith." Why? Because they came in clothes and with hairstyles and with music tastes and with sketchy vocabulary and messy backgrounds very unlike normal "Church People." They had none of the superficial things right.

But on the inside, they had the most important thing right. They knew how desperately they needed Jesus and his grace. They were blown away by the love of a God who would die on a cross to save people like them from their sin. And by the handfuls and then the dozens and then the hundreds and the thousands, these imperfect, needy individuals gave their lives and their worship and their service to Christ in the most amazing way. They became known as "The Jesus People." They birthed the worship movement we now call "Praise Music." They revitalized or launched hundreds of churches. And, through them, the Holy Spirit of God – the God of Pentecost -- brought about the most significant spiritual revival in American history since the Great Awakening.

When a highly respected Christian named Barnabas, brought Paul back to Jerusalem fourteen years after his first failed visit there, the reaction of people like Peter, James and John was now different. They regarded him like I regarded Chuck Smith when I met him – as a surprising agent of the New Pentecost – as somebody through whom God was transforming outcast gentiles into "Jesus People."

Paul, however, didn't know how he would be received. In Galatians 2:2 he says: **I went in response to a revelation and, meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain. (Galatians 2:2).** In other words, he wanted to share with the Christian leaders the strategy he was using to reach the non-Jewish world and make sure that he wasn't in error someplace or missing something. Paul's strategy involved suspending attention to a lot of the superficial things that Jewish Christians regarded as marks of a truly "authentic faith."

The #1 superficial mark was **circumcision = a custom that made someone part of the in-group** of the Judeo-Christian community. But Paul said – like Chuck Smith said to his congregation about the need for haircuts among the hippies coming to faith – **"We need to let that go."** Whether its circumcision or a kosher diet or wearing your beard a certain length or tassels on your clothing, we need to stop getting stuck on the outward stuff. He might say today: Ignore the tatoos, the tears in the jeans, the coffee cup in the hand. Instead, pay attention to the heart. As the prophet once said: **For man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart (1 Samuel 6:17).**

Paul then goes on in Galatians 2 to describe a fight that he'd had a few years before when he ran into the Apostle Peter in Antioch. Let me just observe, parenthetically, that sometimes the purposes of God in our homes and churches and communities cannot move forward until we've had a good fight. Not all fights are constructive, of course. Sometimes they are just stalemates or bloodbaths. But ones where we confess our convictions and truly listen and learn about others can accomplish a crucial shift.

¹¹ But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong. ¹² When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile believers, who were not circumcised. But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision. ¹³ As a result, other Jewish believers followed Peter's hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ When I saw that they were not following the truth of the gospel message, I said to Peter in front of all the others, "Since you, a Jew by birth, have discarded the Jewish laws and are living like a Gentile, why are you now trying to make these Gentiles follow the Jewish traditions? (Galatians 2:11-14 NLT)

I love this part of the story because it just goes to show how hard it is focus on the heart of people instead on superficial things. As you probably know, Peter was no lightweight. Peter had spent years in the personal company of Jesus, watching how Jesus dealt with people, listening to how Jesus focused on the inner life of people. But still, Peter was apparently prone to falling back into legalism and getting hide-bound

about tradition and focusing on superficial things as marks of REAL faith. How might you and I do that with people or even ourselves at times?

You may have heard that Presbyterian pastor, Tim Keller, died on May 19. Tim was an extraordinary disciple with a knack for making Christian truth understandable to simple folks and disarmingly compelling to sophisticated people. In his book, THE PRODIGAL GOD, Keller says that there are two ways we can become spiritually lost. First (like the younger son in Christ's most famous parable), we can become lost by wantonly breaking all the rules our Father has set. That's selfishness. Or secondly, we can become lost by smugly keeping all the rules and demanding to be rewarded for that. That's self-righteousness. Which form of lostness do you think you are more prone to?

Keller writes: *'Neither son loved the father for himself. They both were using the father for their own self-centered ends rather than loving, enjoying, and serving him for his own sake. This means that you can rebel against God and be alienated from him either by breaking his rules or by keeping all of them diligently. It's a shocking message: Careful obedience to God's law may serve as a strategy for rebelling against God.'* – Tim Keller

The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Galatians 2: **¹⁵ "You and I are Jews by birth, not 'sinners' like the Gentiles. ¹⁶ Yet we know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law." ¹⁷ But suppose we seek to be made right with God through faith in Christ and then we are found guilty because we have abandoned the law. Would that mean Christ has led us into sin? Absolutely not!¹⁸ Rather, I am a sinner if I rebuild the old system of law I already tore down. ¹⁹ For when I tried to keep the law, it condemned me. So I died to the law—I stopped trying to meet all its requirements—so that I might live for God. ²⁰ My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die. – Galatians 2:15-21 (NLT)**

When I read Galatians 2, I'm personally struck by TWO TRUTHS that the Apostle Paul was especially passionate about. I think each is relevant for you and me. The first truth is that inward transformation is greater in God's eyes than outward ritual. We make a mistake when we get overly concerned with people's external features and ignore their heart. AND we make a mistake when we take too much comfort in our superficial, socially approved behaviors but ignore what's going on inside of us – the condition of our own heart.

The second big truth is that our security and self-worth need to come from Christ alone. What Paul and those Jesus People in the 1960's have most in common is that they truly understood that they needed GRACE. They realized that, on their own merits, they were not GOOD in anything close to the sense that God is good. They weren't securing a place in heaven on the basis of their moral merit badge count. Whether they were more like the self-righteous Elder Brother in Christ's parable or more like the selfish Younger Brother, their self-worth wasn't going to come from how pure they were or better than others. Their hope wasn't in themselves but in the love of God and in the way that love was invading and transforming their life.

Where is YOUR hope for self-worth or security? Let it be in Christ Alone. Strive to be someone like Paul or like Lonnie and Chuck in the 60's who said: **My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:20).** That picture, my friends, is REAL. That shift from trust in the capacity of our dry Self to trust in the abundance of Christ in our heart is *Authentic Faith*. That's REAL.