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RADICAL: reputation
Galatians 1:10-24

My daughter Rachel is in Turkey right now for a month-long class on early Christianity. I hope when they visit Konya that she has better luck than she did the last time we were there together. Konya is the home of the Sufi sect of Islam. They are famous for these: Whirling Dervishes, the guys who spin around in a trance as they pray. When we were in Konya, we visited a museum dedicated to the Sufis. It was crowded, hot and noisy. The last room was also weird. In the middle was a Plexiglas box containing Mohammad's beard. Rachel was in front of me and, as we were leaning in to look at this odd relic, she suddenly collapsed in my arms. Between the heat and the crowd... she fainted! We lowered her to the ground, gave her some water and she was fine. But when she came to, she was mortified... particularly because she didn't want people to think she had had an ecstatic religious experience in front of Mohammad's beard!

That town, Konya was, in Paul's day, Iconium... one of the four Galatian towns where Paul planted a church on his first missionary journey. Iconium was also the home of the would-be assassins who followed Paul to Lystra and stoned him, leaving him for dead. If Paul's letter to the Galatians comes across as a bit testy—as a little radical—it's because Paul had a skin in the game. He nearly died proclaiming the gospel of Jesus in Galatia. And then after he left, some fast-talking banjo players came into town, preaching a different gospel... and the people were apparently swooning over these new teachers. Paul is mortified to think that his new Christian converts would be so easily misled. And his response is radical. Let's pick up the reading at Galatians 1:6-24.

Tom Tarrants is one of the gentlest men you will ever meet. He has a soft southern drawl. He is a respected, godly Christian who works with the CS Lewis Institute. He lives near Washington D.C. and has quiet but influential relationships with some of the most powerful people in our country. He is humble, gracious and self-effacing, and when you meet him, you would never believe that he was a terrorist.

Tom grew up a racist. He was a member of the terrorist wing of the Ku Klux Klan. He was so dangerous that J. Edgar Hoover ordered him to be shot on sight. He was finally arrested after planting a bomb in the home of a Jew. Tom's female accomplice was shot and killed. He shot a policeman in the heart... who

miraculously lived. Tom was wounded but managed to drive away, until his car was riddled with bullets and he himself shot several more times. He went to prison, he escaped, he was caught again and returned to prison. And it was there that this violent, unrepentant racist, read the Bible with understanding for the first time, discovered the radical story of God's gracious sacrifice for him, and gave his life to Christ. Today, he is an absolutely changed man.

If you find yourself gasping at this story, just trade the name "Saul" for "Tom" and you'll have a better glimpse of the kind of man Saul of Tarsus was. As far as the Jews were concerned, he was the "wunderkind"—the Wonder Boy. He was the prodigy, the head of his class; the up-and-comer who was going to be a big shot among the Pharisees. He knew the scriptures backward and forward, he knew and kept all the rules. He studied in the Harvard of his day under the greatest of Jewish mentors. As far as the Jewish High command was concerned, Saul of Tarsus was a force to be reckoned with.

As far as the early Christians were concerned, Saul of Tarsus was a terrorist. He stood by, holding the robes of the men who murdered Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He was complicit in the arrest, torture and death of many other Christians. As Acts 8 and 9 puts it, "...Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison... [he] was ...breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem."

Paul describes himself as "extremely zealous" in his goal of exterminating Christianity. So how do you account for the fact that this man—this terrorist—became not only a follower of Jesus Christ but his apostle and greatest evangelist? What turns a Saul into a Paul? It is as incredible as Tom Tarrants the Klansman becoming an advocate for racial justice and peace. And both men would point to the same cause: An encounter with the living Christ that transformed them from radical haters and terrorists to radical followers of Jesus.

You know, that is what happens when we meet Christ. Last Sunday, 38 people raised their hands in church to profess faith in Jesus... perhaps a first time for some; perhaps a recommitment for others. But we'd never had a response like that in worship before. The Holy Spirit is at work! And the Bible says that for those who are serious—whose commitments are genuine—something radical happens in that moment. I Corinthians says, "If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come!"

Paul was new and radically changed by his encounter on that road. Jesus met him, called him, saved him and sent him to preach the gospel in Galatia. Many raised their hands when Paul shared his powerful testimony, but since that time other teachers had snuck in and sewn seeds of confusion... calling Paul's teaching into

question... calling his reputation into question. By what right did Paul claim to be an apostle? They had a better gospel to share. When Paul hears about it, he unleashes a vicious attack.

Paul wasn't going to win a popularity contest by what he wrote. But he didn't care. And he says so in verse 10: *"Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ."*

One of the most radical transformations that took place in Paul was this: he stopped caring about his reputation. He stopped trying to be a man-pleaser and made his whole life about pleasing God. Obviously, he stopped trying to please the Jewish authorities. Remember, Paul was the Wonder Boy Pharisee with the bright future. And his reputation was only reinforced when he took it upon himself to become a one-man inquisition against the Christians. The Jewish leaders didn't ask Paul to carry out these attacks. He went to them seeking their authority to persecute Christians. And it must have crossed his mind: "If I do a good job with this, they are going to notice me! My future is set! I will be somebody!"

All of that changed en route to Damascus. When Paul met the resurrected Jesus, he slammed into a wall. He was blind, mute, directionless and he must have had that sickening realization that he was headed in exactly the wrong direction. That sickening feeling that the Jewish authorities he most wanted to impress didn't matter. Their opinion of him didn't matter at all.

Have you ever been there? Sailing along in life, climbing the corporate ladder, marrying your childhood sweetheart, having the perfect 2¹/₃ children, living in beautiful, prosperous Gig Harbor... by all appearances everything is perfect. All of your neighbors and shallow friends—the ones you want most desperately to impress—are apparently impressed. And yet, you suddenly hit the wall. You discover the emptiness, the wrong-headedness of that kind of life... that life of perpetual man-pleasing.

When Jesus met Paul on that road, he set him free from the shackles of feeling like he had to please men... and not just the Jewish authorities. Paul also realized that he didn't need to please the apostles, either. Think about it. What would have been your first instinct if the risen Christ had met you on the road and stopped you dead in your tracks? Wouldn't you be inclined to run to Jerusalem and talk to the apostles... to get new marching orders from them?

But that's not what happened. God drove Saul into the desert. Paul says *"I did not consult any man."* For three years, God trained Saul revealing to him who He was and what He wanted Saul to do.

And as we look back, that makes sense. The apostles were hunkered down in Jerusalem. If Saul had come to them following his conversion they might have

said, "Perfect... you are a highly trained Jew, a Pharisee who has converted to Christ. You will be perfect to carry on the work of Jesus right here in Jerusalem... perfect for preaching the gospel of Jesus to your fellow Jews." That might have pleased the apostles, but that wasn't God's plan at all. God intended to send Paul to the Gentiles. God's unexpected plan was to take this well-trained Jew and use him to reach the non-Jews of the Roman world.

This is not to say that Paul didn't acknowledge the authority of the apostles. That's why he ultimately did go to Jerusalem and stayed with Peter for fifteen days. But the false teachers in Galatia seemed to be saying that Paul wasn't really an apostle; he was just parroting what the apostles in Jerusalem told him to say. And Paul makes it clear—he even says, *"I'm not lying about this"*—that he didn't even meet the other apostles nor was he even known by the churches in Judea. And yet his reputation as the terrorist who became the Christian had become a source of praise and thanksgiving among those churches. Paul the Man-pleaser had become Paul the God-pleaser. Radical!

What do you think? Do we live in a culture of man-pleasers? Does it matter to us what other people think about us? Do we make any of our decisions based, not upon what God wants us to do, but upon what our friends and neighbors and family members and fellow-workers might think? How much of an air-brushed, manicured, botoxed, credit-line pretense do we put forward because of our desperate desire to please and impress others? Do you know how radical it is for Paul to say, *"I do not live to please man anymore; I live to please God!"* And do you know how radical that would be for us, too?

I understand what it means to what to be a man-pleaser. I don't get just an annual performance review. I get a weekly performance review... every Sunday. Asking myself, "What are the signs I did a good job with my sermon? Do they still like me? Will they come back next week for more?" This was one of my great struggles in my earlier ministry—this desire for affirmation, this chasing after approval, this wanting to be liked. It is the reason I stopped looking at attendance numbers every week. It is bad for my soul. It is the reason I stopped going to the foyer after every service to shake hands and have people tell me they liked my sermon... bad for my soul. I know what it means to want to be a man-pleaser, and I live in the tension of trying to care only about whether or not God is pleased with my work.

How many decisions do you make, how many actions do you take, how many dollars do you spend, how many corners do you shave or truths do you bend so that you will please the people around you? Ironically, often people you don't even like that much! But still, you want to impress them. You want to please. So you drive a certain car, wear certain clothes, join a certain club, drop certain names, drink certain wines... all to impress... all to please others. Do you realize how radical it would be if we learned this one thing from Paul: It is not my job in life to please other people.

A week from now the Seahawks play in the Super Bowl. One of the great stories of this team is of a young quarterback who was "too short" to make it in the NFL. If anyone understands the pressure of pleasing people it is a professional athlete. Listen to what Russell Wilson has to say about that. [[Video](#)]

An Audience of One... that is radical. What difference would it make in your life if God set you free from the compulsion to chase after the approval and pleasure of other human beings... if he delivered you from the need to impress other people, from being a man-pleaser? In this culture that would be radical, wouldn't it? And I know there are hundreds here today who need that deliverance.

But here's something even more radical! Not only do we not have to please men, we don't have to please God, either. Look at verse 15:

"But ... God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles..."

I want you to understand how doubly radical this is. In this self-description of his own salvation, Paul makes this incredible declaration: God set me apart from birth. God called me by his grace. God was pleased to reveal his son to me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles. Did you pick up on that? God did it all for Paul because God was pleased to. Was he pleased with Paul's behavior? Not hardly! Remember, God called Paul when he was on the way to persecute Christians! He had a reputation as a terrorist. Paul wasn't pleasing God. Yet he didn't need to. God was already pleased, not with what Paul was doing but simply because God chose to love him and use him to proclaim the gospel of his Son. It pleased God to do so.

God chose to love Paul despite his performance, not because of it. That's what I mean when I say that the radical call of the gospel means that not only do we not have to please man anymore, we don't even have to please God. God is already pleased with us. He already loves us. There is nothing we could do that would make God love us more and nothing we can do to make God love us less. He proved that in Jesus. As one preacher put it, "Jesus was somebody, so I'm free to be nobody." (Tullian Tchividjian) That is the utterly unique message of the Christian gospel. Every other religion on earth depends upon us trying to please God in order to be saved. Only Christianity depends upon God's being pleased enough with us in the first place to save us.

Of course, if we love God, if we know God, if we are growing in faith we want to act in ways that are more pleasing to God. That is our lifelong journey of sanctification... of allowing the Holy Spirit to make us more holy as we submit to God's Word. That's what happens after we belong to God... after he has saved us. We live in ways that are more pleasing. We discover the joy of performing for an Audience of One. But the gracious message of the gospel is that we were saved in

the first place, not because we managed to please God, but because God was pleased to save us... period.

There is a song that speaks perfectly to this radical truth. Please, listen.

This Journey is My Own (Sara Groves)

When I stand before the Lord, I'll be standing alone
This journey is my own
Still I want man's advice, and I need man's approval
This journey is my own

Why would I want to live for man, and pay the highest price
What does it mean to gain a whole world, only to lose my life

So much of what I do is to make a good impression
This journey is my own
And so much of what I say is to make myself look better
But this journey is my own

And why would I want to live for man, and pay the highest price
And what does it mean to gain a whole world, only to lose my life

And I have never felt relief like I feel it right now
This journey is my own
Cuz trying to please the world, it was breaking me down
It was breaking me down

And now I live and I breathe for an audience of one
Now I live and I breathe for an audience of one
Now I live and I breathe for an audience of one
Cuz I know this journey is my own

And why would I want to live for man, and pay the highest price
And what does it mean to gain a whole world, only to lose my life
And you can live for someone else, and it will only bring you pain
I can't even judge myself, only the Lord can say, 'Well done.'

Oh, this journey is my own

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- DIG DEEPER

1. Paul wants to make clear that he is not trying to please man; that he wants to be a God-pleaser. Where do you find that in the text? Can you share a time when you struggled with being a man-pleaser?
2. It is radical that we don't have to please man. Even more radical: we don't have to please God, either, according to Paul. Do you agree? How is that the unique, Christian gospel?
3. What one "man-pleasing" thing would God call you to surrender?