

“The Fruit of Revelation: True Life in Christ”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for FUMC Grand Junction, Sunday, May 9, 2021

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website: <https://www.fumcgj.org/sermons/>

Scripture Text:

Gal. 1:1-3, 11-12; 2:19b-20 [NRSV]

OPENING

One of the things I find fascinating about the New Testament is the interplay between the latter 2/3 of Acts of the Apostles and the correspondence of Paul.

While you have to allow for some differences in the way they tell the story of the formation of the early church, they provide for remarkable reading and are best read together, in my opinion. (*ILLUSTRATE with my own “discovery” of the links among these works and my first reading in this way.*)

TO THE SCRIPTURES

In terms of today’s sermon, the first two chapters of Galatians shed a “teasing light” on the subject matter of Acts 15, which we looked at in some detail last Sunday. So, the reading from Galatians forms something like a “prequel” to that sermon.

I say it’s a “teasing light” because not enough is known about the timing of the travels, conversations, and meetings Paul refers to in Galatians with respect to Acts 15. These things could have preceded the

Council in Jerusalem we talked about last week or followed it. Regardless, the existential crisis we talked about last week, i.e., whether or not one had to be circumcised to be a follower of Jesus, is the same.

It is a critical matter of Jewish law *versus* the grace of Jesus Christ in the role of salvation that Paul addresses in Galatians. But in this letter, he also makes a case for his own status as an apostle, with every bit of the authority and authenticity of the others – perhaps more so, in his view – because of the source from which he received it: direct revelation of the risen Christ Himself.

In Paul’s mind, this is critical because it entitles him to a serious hearing: as someone *not* inventing new theology and practice but passing on what had been revealed to him by the only truly authoritative Source anyone could point to: Jesus Christ Himself.

And he pointed to his own record AND his conversion of proof of his authenticity as, first, a disciple of Jesus, and then, as an apostle: a “sent one”, commissioned by Jesus to spread the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Him alone, not by any works of the Law.

Of his own admission and as a matter of public record, Paul (Saul) had been a persecutor of the Church and, therefore, of Jesus Christ Himself (Acts 9:4). So, he knew he had a long, uphill battle to fight to establish his credibility as an apostle – a fight he won at great personal cost in terms of his suffering for Christ and the Gospel.

SERMON THOUGHTS

That being said, we have to be careful not to make of Paul an unquestioned Biblical “hero”. In fact, we have to be careful not to do that to anyone in the Scriptures – save for Christ Himself.

Paul is unabashedly human in every way! In fact, toward the end of this letter to the Galatian churches, he is SO worked up about what he sees as the seeds of heretical teaching being sown among them concerning the Jewish Law and circumcision, he writes with intense anger, “I wish those who were pushing circumcision on you would slip with the knife and emasculate *themselves!*” (Gal. 5:12) Not very “Christian” of Paul, we might say!

But you know, I was in a great conversation this past week with a colleague along these very lines of our tendency to turn Biblical characters into heroes – AND villains. What makes the Bible so enduring and, frankly, reliable is the very way its authors and compilers refused to distort the humanity of those whose stories they told or allowed to be told in full. And because of that, I can find myself, my story, in the pages of the Bible, too, in all its glory and in all its failure...in all I'd be happy to have shouted from the rooftops (Matt. 10:27) and all I'd just as soon be “cancelled”, to use that term common in today's speech and culture.

Another way to say this is that if God can work redemptively through someone like Paul – and countless other fully human beings – maybe God can

work redemptively through my life and ministry AND YOURS, as well.

CONCLUSION

This brings me to the concluding thought for today, one that comes through the message of Paul in these early chapters of his letter to the Galatians:

True life in Christ is a fruit of the Spirit that grows to ripeness in response to the revelation of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.

It is only as a result of that revelation – attested to by the Apostle Paul – that we could ever say with him, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

And as stark as it sounds, that is the goal of the Christian life. Jesus said it himself when He spoke of our denying ourselves, taking up our cross daily and following Him, and our saving our lives by losing them for His sake and the sake of the Gospel (Mark 8:34-35 and parallels).

That “hard word” of dying to self to live in Christ isn't shared much anymore. We seem to go from a Gospel of “cheap grace” on the one hand to the “health, wealth, and prosperity Gospel” on the other in many popular Christian circles / traditions today. But

The early 20th century German Christian theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (of whom I have become an ardent student of late), reminds us of the depth and the

truth of this word in his writings on discipleship and in his willing martyrdom in witness to the truth of the Gospel in the face of the monstrous Adolf Hitler, the Nazi Party, and those who did their evil biddings.

May it be that you and I would yearn for Jesus to reveal Himself to us through the Holy Spirit that our lives might bear the fruit of discipleship for which Bonhoeffer gave his life: true life in Christ.

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