

SERIES: Free At Last!

SERMON: **Don't Mess with the Messenger!**

SCRIPTURE: Galatians 1:11-2:10

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Last Lord's Day Josh preached a great sermon entitled, "*Don't Mess with the Message!*" It was a hard-nosed, intolerant sermon based upon a hard-nosed, intolerant passage of Scripture. In essence the thrust was that anyone who adds to or subtracts from the Gospel message is playing with fire; in fact, he's playing with hell-fire.

Today I want to speak to you on a related topic, "Don't Mess with the Messenger!" This, too, is going to be a hard-nosed, intolerant sermon based on another hard-nosed intolerant passage of Scripture. But right up front I want to put your mind at ease. Your pastor is not the messenger you must not mess with. I'll explain who *is* in a moment.

In both of the churches I have served over the past 35 years, I have had a layman whom I considered my pastor. Pastors need pastors, too, you know. During my first tenure here at First Free my pastor was a dear man some of you remember, Gene Nelson. Gene was always there for me—encouraging me, counseling me, and defending me. He had a favorite saying for anyone who criticized his pastor, "Touch not the Lord's anointed!" He got it from Psalm 105:15, which reads in the NIV: "Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm."

Now I greatly appreciated Gene's solicitous concern for my welfare, but I must admit that he probably misinterpreted that Psalm. The anointed ones in that passage were ordinary Israelites, not clergy, and the prophets were a unique group of divine spokesmen. As a young man in my 30's I certainly didn't qualify as a prophet. Frankly, while I don't think pastors should be picked on, I do believe it is just as legitimate to criticize them as anyone else. The clergy today have no inherent authority, nor do we need any. The Word of God, accurately taught, is all the authority we need.

"Don't mess with messenger" refers to the apostolic messenger. You see, Paul was not just a preacher of the Word of God; he was *writing* it! He was delivering revelation directly from God that would be authoritative for the Church down through the centuries. The Holy Spirit was superintending his writing to keep him from error. Therefore, it was incumbent upon the Church to accept his authority and submit to his doctrine.

Over the past two weeks we have been introduced to the fact that there were teachers in the Galatian churches, who felt it was their prerogative to reject Paul's Gospel of grace in favor of a gospel of their own—a gospel of grace plus works—which, according to Paul, is not good news at all but bad news.

Now these teachers were smart enough to realize that if they were to succeed in weaning Paul's

converts away from his Gospel and attract them to their own, they would have to challenge his credentials and authority. In other words, if and only if they could demonstrate that Paul was something less than a divinely appointed Apostle, could they succeed in undermining his teaching.

And raising doubts about Paul's credentials as an apostle wasn't as difficult as one might think, because Paul was not one of the Twelve Apostles. In fact, he once persecuted the Apostles and their early converts. Paul never met Jesus during his earthly life, and he didn't even become a convert to Christianity until after the crucifixion and resurrection. The false teachers used all these facts to insinuate that Paul was less than an Apostle. Furthermore, they alleged that the *real* Apostles (The Twelve) taught a different Gospel message from the one Paul taught!

It is in the context of these vicious personal attacks that Paul shares his own personal faith story in Galatians 1:11-2:10.

*I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.*

*For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when 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 did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus.*

*Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. Later I went to Syria and Cilicia. I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they praised God because of me.*

*Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.*

*As for those who seemed to be important—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance—those men added nothing to my message. On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an*

*apostle to the Gentiles. James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.*

Here is the question I want us to wrestle with this morning: How does this testimony of Paul's spiritual journey fit into the argument of Galatians? We have already seen that a group of churches which Paul planted on his first missionary journey were embroiled in controversy. Once Paul moved on in his missionary travels, false teachers infiltrated the churches of Galatia, spreading the heresy that it is necessary to keep the Law in order to be saved. They agreed with the Judean teachers quoted in Acts 15:1, "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This addition was such a serious perversion of the Gospel that Paul fired off this letter to condemn the false teachers and to defend the Gospel.

He also felt compelled to defend his apostleship against the concerted attacks of these false teachers. He opens his defense in verses 11 & 12 by saying in effect, "If you want to challenge my Gospel, you're going to have to challenge Jesus Himself, because I got it from Him." The best way for Paul to prove this point is to reach back into his past and remind the Galatian Christians of how God saved him and how God dealt with him. So, he flashes on the screen several pictures from his past as evidence that his apostleship and his Gospel were truly from God. He starts with his life B.C.

### **Paul's life before Christ (13-14)**

**Persecution of the Church of God.** Paul, with his strong Jewish heritage, originally saw Christianity as a dangerous aberration that needed to be eliminated. From the book of Acts we learn that he imprisoned Christians, he voted for their execution, he beat them in their houses of worship, he tortured them in an effort to get them to blaspheme Christ, and when they fled the country, he pursued them even on foreign soil. He was in the big leagues as far as persecution of the early disciples was concerned.

By the way, when Paul tells us in verse 13 about "how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it," the words "the church of God," are intended to heighten the enormity of his crime. He persecuted churches that belonged to the very God he mistakenly thought he was serving. Christians are still being persecuted today—often by people who think they are serving God when they do it.

**Advancement in Judaism (14).** While he was persecuting the Church, Paul was climbing the religious ladder of Judaism. Though still a young man he was already a member of the Sanhedrin and seemed destined for significant leadership among his people. But Paul was like Gueneveer in the legend of King Arthur. Gueneveer, it says, "never cared for God. She was a good theologian, but that was all." That describes Paul in his former life in Judaism—a good theologian but far from God. He was too consumed by religious fervor, too busy with religious

projects, too involved in imposing his theological views on others. He didn't have time for God. By the way, friends, that can be a danger for us, too.

Now at first blush it may seem strange that Paul should try to defend himself by talking about his persecution of the church and his advancement in Judaism. It almost seems like he is playing right into the hands of his detractors, agreeing that his background contained nothing to generate confidence. But in fact he is turning their entire argument on its head by saying, "It is precisely because I was the kind of person I have just described—a persecutor of Christians, and a religious zealot—that what I am now—a preacher of the Gospel—must be a miracle of God. There is no other way to account for it."

But even more importantly, this review of Paul's pre-conversion days contains a subtle but devastating *coup de grace* to the Galatian heretics. They are professing a concern for the Law which Paul does not have. But Paul, in effect, says,

*"I am not ignorant of your Law. There was a time when I was an absolute fanatic for Jewish Law. I not only followed it; I demanded that everyone else follow it too. With passionate intensity I once tried to earn God's favor and approval through the Law. Been there, done that! How absurd for you to return to what I have abandoned!"*

May we learn from Paul's example that religion does not bring people nearer the truth—more often than not, it keeps them from finding it. Isn't it interesting that the most religious people in the Gospels are almost always the farthest from the kingdom? That was true with the scribes and the Pharisees of Jesus' day. It was true with the medieval Catholic church. It is true with Muslim jihadists today. And it can be true of evangelicals, too.

Many years ago John W. Montgomery, former prof at our seminary, TEDS, wrote a little book entitled, "*Damned Through the Church*"—a shocking title, but profoundly relevant. It describes the experience of many who have been lulled to sleep spiritually by putting their faith in religion or in the Church or in a label. Faith must be placed in a person, the person of Jesus Christ, and specifically in His sacrificial death.

Having considered his *former* manner of life, Paul now turns to his conversion.

### **Paul's conversion (15-16)**

I find verse 15 and the first part of verse 16 to be a fascinating way to describe the new birth experience. Paul writes, "But when 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 did not consult any man." Paul here describes his actual conversion by means of three phrases:

1. God set me apart from birth.
2. He called me by His grace.
3. He revealed His Son in me.

First, “God set me apart from birth.” Let me ask you a question. When did *you* become a child of God? The answer, of course, is different for each of us, depending upon that day and hour (unknown to some of us, of course) when we began to trust completely in the death of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. But you know, while no person actually possesses eternal life until he believes, each one’s personal salvation story begins long before that. Paul says God initiated the salvation process for him at birth, from his mother's womb.

Actually, he could have gone back even further, like he did in Eph. 1:4, where he says that God “chose us in Christ before the creation of the world.” For some people, such an idea is very difficult to accept, because words like that seem to diminish our part in the salvation process. But that’s exactly what Paul is trying to do. These verses clearly confirm that salvation is of the Lord and not an accident of birth or culture or environment.

But if God only set Paul apart from birth and didn't actually confront him with the Gospel, Paul would not have been saved. God, however, took a second step toward Paul. Here’s how he puts it: “God called me by His grace.” Paul's call came in a most remarkable fashion on the Damascus Road, as he was struck with a blinding light and an audible voice from heaven. My call, on the other hand, came in a most ordinary way when as a little boy of 5, I was convicted of my sin and sought out my dad to help me deal with a guilty conscience. He explained to me the plan of salvation. Your call probably came in a way distinct from Paul’s or mine. The important thing to remember is that every genuine salvation call comes from God—no man on his own seeks for God.

Furthermore, it’s critical to see that the basis for God's call is always grace—unmerited favor. God does not look into the future, using His omniscience as a kind of divine radar to spot those who have a predisposition to believe, and then call them to be His children. Quite the contrary, the basis for His choice is found in Himself. Ephesians 1 says, “He chose us according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us . . .” Grace is the sole explanation as to why any of us are today numbered among God's children.

And then the third step occurred: “God revealed His Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles.” This was both an outward and an inward revelation in Paul’s case. God revealed His Son to Paul when he *saw* the risen Christ on the Damascus Road. But even more important was the inner illumination of his soul, as God broke down the religious prejudices he grew up with and opened Paul’s eyes so he could see exactly who Jesus was—the Son of God and the Savior of the world. That is what enabled Paul to become God’s ambassador to the Gentile world. The point of rehearsing his conversion is to demonstrate that his salvation and his call to ministry are all of God.

Having presented his pre-conversion way of life, and then his new birth experience itself, Paul now turns our attention thirdly to his subsequent spiritual journey.

### **Paul’s subsequent spiritual journey (16-21)**

In this section Paul seems to have two primary goals. One is to demonstrate his independence from the Twelve Apostles in Jerusalem. The other goal is to show that when he eventually did have contact with the Apostles, they confirmed the Gospel he preached rather than contradicted it.

First, he tells us what his spiritual journey did not involve.

### **What it did *not* involve.**

**Consultation with human advisors.** He says in verse 16, “I did not consult any man.” Paul didn't check with his rabbi to see if there was precedence for his kind of conversion. He didn't go to a shrink to make sure this wasn't some kind of an emotional trip. He knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that he had met Christ on that Damascus Road.

**Nor did he make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (verse 17).** Paul didn't go sit at the feet of Peter, James, John, and the other Apostles. His point is not that such a visit wouldn't have been an enviable privilege, but God didn't allow him to do so, and now Paul is glad he didn't, because it enables him to deny the false teachers' claim that he got his Gospel from them but then distorted it.

### **What his spiritual journey *did* include was . . .**

**Fourteen years of preparation (18-24),** starting with (1) a trip to Arabia (17). For the better part of three years Paul went away to the desert. While we have no details concerning this trip, it appears that the purpose of this sabbatical was meditation, study, and prayer. It's not hard to understand why a little time away should be deemed valuable, for here is a leader in one religion suddenly called to be a leader in another. He would need a complete reorientation experience.

Before he talks to men Paul must talk to God. Some have referred to this as his seminary career. I can't help but think some pastors might get more out of three years in the Arabian desert than three years in most seminaries (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and a number of others excepted!). Chuck Colson, one of the really brilliant thinkers in Christianity today, did his preparation for ministry in a “gated community,” a federal prison. I'd say it was pretty effective.

Then after his trip to Arabia, (2) Paul returned to Damascus where his Christian experience had begun (verse 17). This was a courageous thing to do, for you'll recall that the last time he was in Damascus Paul was a real basket case (he escaped over the city wall by being lowered by his friends in a basket as he was being sought by the authorities). Returning three years later was undoubtedly quite risky, but God had work for him to do there.

Then three years later,<sup>1</sup> (3) Paul made his first trip to Jerusalem since his conversion, but it was brief. In verses 18-20 he explains, “Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get

acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord’s brother. I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie.” This trip, too, took courage. Paul’s former friends, the Jews, would now be out for his blood, while his former victims, the Christians, could only be expected to ostracize him due to skepticism about his new-found faith. In fact, this is exactly what happened. In Acts 9:26 we read, “When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.”

While in Jerusalem for those two weeks, Paul stayed with Peter. Can you imagine their conversations, with Paul undoubtedly telling Peter of his conversion on the Damascus Road, and Peter telling Paul about the 3 ½ years he spent as a disciple of Jesus? But Paul’s primary purpose in mentioning this visit seems to be that there was no disagreement between him and Peter about the nature of the Gospel. The only other apostle he met was James, the Lord’s brother. And he goes out of his way to swear that he is telling the truth.

From Jerusalem, it says in verse 21, (4) Paul took a trip to Syria and Cilicia. Nothing is known of this trip, but Paul was born in Cilicia in the city of Tarsus, so perhaps he went there to tell boyhood friends about his new-found faith. He apparently mentions it to indicate that he kept his distance from Jerusalem.

Finally, according to Galatians 2:1 (and this is at least 14 years after his conversion), Paul has his first major consultation with the Apostles in Jerusalem. It was during this meeting that he finally formally submitted his views on the Gospel to the Twelve Apostles. But contrary to the insinuations of the false teachers in Galatia, the result was confirmation, not contradiction of what he taught.

**Confirmation from the Twelve Apostles (2:1-10)** Look again at 2:9: “James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews.”

Furthermore, Paul reveals a very interesting historical fact. When he went up to meet with the Apostles, he took along with him a friend named Titus (2:1). Now Titus was a Gentile believer and had never been circumcised. If keeping the law was necessary for salvation, surely the Twelve Apostles would have insisted that Titus be circumcised. But they didn’t, even though there were some lobbyists for the Mosaic Law at the meeting who tried to force the issue. Paul says in verse 5, “We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.” To capitulate to these legalists would have been to compromise the Gospel. Paul was well-known to make concessions to weak Christians but not to phony, heretical ones.

To summarize, Paul’s pre-conversion career was one of fanatical law-keeping; his conversion itself was a miracle completely initiated and pulled off by God; his post-conversion experience involved almost total isolation from the Twelve Apostles during his “seminary” days ; and when

he finally had the opportunity to share with the Twelve what God had revealed to him, they didn't challenge him but rather confirmed his teaching. Therefore, his message was clearly not from man, but from God. The false teachers at Galatia have no more grounds to mess with God's messenger than they had to mess with the message itself.

Now I would like to turn to a question some of you may have been mulling:

### **So what?**

Perhaps this all sounds like much ado about nothing—an ancient argument of little consequence to us in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Why bother? Friends, it is more relevant than you realize.

**1. When God's apostolic messenger speaks (i.e. writes), the Church must listen.** The fundamental problem in the church today is that its leaders so often feel free to adjust the apostolic message to fit their feelings or circumstances or culture. We don't have that right! The faith was once for all delivered to the saints through the apostles and prophets, according to the book of Jude.<sup>ii</sup>

Ten years ago I wrote to a professor at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, a leading seminary of the United Church of Christ, to ask him why that denomination felt free to ordain those whose lifestyles are clearly condemned in Scripture. In a six-page hand-written letter to me, this professor of New Testament protested the inference in my letter that he didn't take Scripture seriously,

*I do see Scripture as holy, trustworthy, and absolutely authoritative; and precisely because I do, I cannot consider the Bible to be inerrant.* (Now I have to tell you, I fail to see the logic in that, but he tries to explain it as he continues). *The divine word is dynamic rather than static. In short, it has changed* (he underlines those words); *and I conclude, must continue to change in order to remain faithful. We anticipate that the Holy Spirit will enable us to interpret faithfully God's Word for our place and time* (again he underlines) *If there is anything unchanging about God and God's Word, it is that God never fails to be loving.* (Implication: you're failing to be loving when you tell a practicing homosexual he can't be a pastor).

Later he writes, "One doesn't have to deconstruct the Gospels; they fall apart in your hands." (Deconstruction, by the way, is the postmodern term for peeling away the sacredness of Scripture and demonstrating that it is a thoroughly human book). And again he adds, "My model for disobeying certain things in the Bible is Jesus himself, whom I also take as the embodiment of God's determination to love the whole world graciously. For me, *that* is absolutely authoritative, and the Bible tells me so."

Friends, when people feel free to mess with either the message or the messenger, i.e. when they feel free to reject what the apostles and the prophets have revealed to us as the very Word of God, everything is up for grabs. Right is called wrong, wrong is called right. Light is called

darkness and darkness called light. The Gospel becomes whatever the individual wants it to be.

By the way, if I can take a rare and brief excursion into the political realm, this is exactly what is happening in our day to the U.S. Constitution. There is a whole school of jurisprudence devoted to deconstructing the Constitution, claiming that is a living document, dynamic rather than static. It doesn't matter what the founding fathers meant; the only thing that matters is what present day judges mean.

Thus rights that Adams and Franklin and Jefferson could never have imagined—like abortion on demand or same-sex marriage—are routinely read into the Constitution. Or take the Tenth Amendment: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” Judges routinely pay no attention to that amendment at all, as the Federal Government continually expands its reach. Friends, we are seeing in the political realm exactly what we have been experiencing in the spiritual realm. Both the foundation documents of our nation and the founding documents of our faith are being shredded before our eyes. We'd better wake up.

Now there are two other “so what's” I want to address very briefly that focus not on the controversy in Galatia but on Paul's testimony itself.

**2. When a sinful person is truly converted, the change is radical. (22,23)** Paul's reputation was once so bad that when the Judean churches heard of his conversion, they didn't know what to do with the report (verse 22), “The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” They were stunned. This was not the same man.

Friends, God is still in the business of revolutionizing people's lives. I know a serial adulterer who surrendered to Christ and God is in the process of changing him into a devoted family man. I know a woman who was once a greedy materialist who is today a generous person, concerned about the welfare of others, again because Christ has captured her. I know a proud intellectual who used to insist on his own views, but once he came to realize that Jesus died for him, there is a new humility and a new openness to the views of others.

The Scripture tells us that “If any person is in Christ he is a new creation.” That transformation involves radical surgery and should result in radical change. I'm not suggesting that the radical change will occur overnight and that the day after one's conversion he will immediately be a spiritual dynamo. As a matter of fact, it took at least 14 years after his conversion before Paul was ready to take on his life's work for God. Leadership requires character and character takes times to develop. But if we cannot point to a “before” and “after” in our lives, how is the world to see that Christ makes a difference?

**3. When a sinful person is transformed, God deserves all the glory. (24)** Whether you have a notorious past or you received Christ at age 5, God deserves all the glory. Paul says in the last verse of chapter 1: “They praised *God* because of me,” i.e. because of what has happened to

him. Could that be said of you and me today? Are people glorifying God because of the remarkable change that has taken place in our lives? Or are they saying, “If that's what becoming a Christian is all about, what’s the point?” May God help each of us to experience the new creation He has planned for us so that He might be glorified.

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i. Paul may mean three years after his conversion.

ii. There may be those in the church today who have the *gift* of apostle or prophet, but I do not believe there are any with the *office* of apostle or prophet. Even those who had the office, like Peter or Paul, were not themselves infallible (as we will clearly see next week). Only the Scripture, which God used them to reveal, is infallible.