

## **“Force vs. Faith”**

### **Scripture Text: Acts 9:17-31**

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Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA

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### **Context**

Please turn in your Bibles to Acts 9. Our focus this evening will begin with v. 17, but it is important to remember that the first half of this chapter features the zealous Paul, also named Saul. This young Pharisee was zealous to destroy all those who followed Jesus’ teaching.

This chapter begins by telling us that Saul was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” and was on his way to Damascus seeking to bind up men and women belonging to “the Way” to take them to Jerusalem.

On that very mission, Jesus intervened, blinding him with his glorious light and saying: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” 5 And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” [Acts 9:4-5]

Saul was speechless and, in his blindness, had to be led by the hand into Damascus, where he fasted from food and water and prayed for three days.

Next, we read that the Lord sent him Ananias to regain his sight, and that is where we pick up in our reading.

### **The Reading of God’s Word**

**Acts 9:17** So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; 19 and taking food, he was strengthened.

#### *Saul Proclaims Jesus in Synagogues*

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. 20 And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” 21 And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?” 22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

#### *Saul Escapes from Damascus*

**Acts 9:23** When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, <sup>24</sup> but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, <sup>25</sup> but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

### *Saul in Jerusalem*

**Acts 9:26** And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. <sup>27</sup> But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. <sup>28</sup> So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. <sup>29</sup> And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. <sup>30</sup> And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

**Acts 9:31** So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

**This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.  
Let's pray together.**

### **Context**

In chapter 9 we are given a rare behind-the-scenes view into Paul's conversion. We read the account and imagine the fear that must have overwhelmed him when he realized not only that Jesus was alive, but he was the true Messiah. And then to realize that all of his zealous efforts as a Pharisee to persecute the men and women who were followers of Jesus had been completely wrong! He had been persecuting the Messiah!

Can you imagine? To be blinded by the Son of God and rebuked in person! I would have died inside. No wonder Paul could do nothing but fast and pray until Ananias arrived. That was the appropriate response for a persecutor of Jesus the Messiah!

By God's grace, Paul's sight is restored at the hand of Ananias, and Paul is baptized, receiving the Holy Spirit. Then we read that he immediately went and proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues (a completely different message) teaching that Jesus was the Son of God.

In this complete 180 reversal, we see that Paul goes from actively persecuting Christians to actively being persecuted *because he was a Christian*. We see that the Jews response is to immediately find a way to kill him.

**And here in Paul's conversion we see two very different approaches in this account.**

***Namely: Force vs. Faith***

The Jews seek complete power and control for themselves, bringing their kingdom by force, while Jesus' followers seek to make God known through humility and service and by faith.

### ***By Force***

To accomplish things by force is to push God's plan and timing aside and to take charge of a given situation. This of course happens repeatedly throughout Scripture. People taking matters into their own hands in their impatience or lack of faith.

Throughout Scripture have you ever noticed how much the Jews are intent on killing people? Anyone who contradicts them, or makes them look bad, they determine to cast out, to condemn or to kill. While they receive counsel to relent from using force, they inevitably fall back to beating, killing or forcing people into subjection.

In John 9, when a man who was born blind was healed by Jesus on the Sabbath day, the Pharisees were livid. The man's parents refused to get involved out of fear of what the Pharisees might do, and when the man who had been healed pushed back against the Jews, their response was to cast him out and accuse him of being born in sin.

In John 11, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, and because so many people were believing and following Jesus on account of this, the Jews met and said,

“What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” [John 11:47-48]

And they decided that the best thing to do would be to kill him. What?! How blind were they in their desire for power? If Jesus was able to raise him from the dead once, couldn't he just do it again?

But this is the pattern that we see among the Jews and other in this world. They use force and power to accomplish their mission at all costs. They needed to control and silence any opposing forces and they are unwilling to wait for God's solution, wisdom and timing.

### ***By Faith***

Jesus, on the other hand, did not force his way. He took the path of faith and called his disciples to do the same.

He and his followers are to be meek and lowly. A bruised reed Jesus would not break. Jesus' followers were not to be zealots. As you may recall, it was Jesus who told Peter to put away his sword, and instead insisted that his followers were to love their enemies and to turn the other cheek.

Jesus taught them saying, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” [John 18:36]

Jesus' followers hold fast *in faith* to the promises of the Covenant. Our goal is not to accumulate treasures and power in this world, but in heaven. Even Abraham “was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.” His focus was not on the power of this

world, but of the world to come, that is given and governed by the power of the God who designed it.

The disciple's goal was to preach and to witness, to win over the lost. To be humble and self-sacrificial. The disciples were to be known by their love and their faith, not by their force.

And that is the contrast that we see here in this passage.

Paul is transformed *from a religious forceful zealot* to a man who trusted and loved God and loved his neighbor. He is transformed from an abuser of people to a man who would later say that he wished he could give up his life for the salvation of others. [Romans 9:3] The gospel transformed Paul into a man who loved God and loved his fellow man. What a change!

And that is a key distinction between the Jews and the followers of Christ. If you feel like people have become an obstacle in life, beware. Loving God also requires loving people.

### **Loving God and Loving Others**

Over the past few weeks, I've been thinking a lot about the way the Scriptures emphasize the connection between loving God and loving your fellow brother.

God had made it so that our love for God is *necessarily tied* with loving those he has placed around us. We cannot love God who we have not seen, if we cannot love those we have seen. [1 John 4:20]

God teaches us that we cannot love him if we do not love our brother. In fact, you may remember that this is so important to Jesus that in the gospel of Matthew, if we find ourselves about to give an offering to the Lord and there remember we have something against our brother, we are to leave our offering there, and first go be reconciled, then return to offer our gift! In other words, God doesn't even want us to come into this place of worship acting like we love him, when we have some unresolved issue against our brother or sister. We cannot sit there praising God, thanking him for his forgiveness while maintaining resentment in our hearts. No! He says, first, be reconciled. *Then*, come and worship.

In Matthew 6:15 Jesus says it strongly: "if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Jesus also reminds us that when we serve the "least of these," we serve *him*. To love God, means that we must also love our brothers. In other words, loving the brethren goes hand-in-hand with loving God. We cannot separate it.

But this is a difficult concept to grasp. Many of us would agree that we feel we can love God, but it can be really difficult to love people that we feel might not deserve it.

And, as Christians, we have a strong moral compass. When we see wrong being committed, we feel like we need to stand up for Christ, and for his honor. It is easy to want to be the enforcer – the judge. To shut down evil, and to bring righteousness. We can be really good at that.

In fact, one of the most frequent verses, I have heard Christians quote is Prov. 27:5 “Better is open rebuke, than hidden love.” I find it really interesting that of all the verses out there on mercy, forgiveness, humility, and love, the one we all like to quote most it seems is “better is open rebuke, than hidden love!” Could it be that in our zeal, Christians sometimes like to rebuke a little *too much* and rather should be growing in learning how to love well??

**I highlight this because as we see in this passage, zeal can be tricky. Yes, zeal can be good. But it can also be misguided and can cause all sorts of problems.**

We might remember that in the gospel of John, Jesus taught that, “... the hour is coming when whoever *kills you will THINK he is offering service to God.* 3 And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. [John 16:2-3]

And that is exactly the type of zeal and passion that we saw in Paul and the Jews of his day. In Acts 8 we read that “Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” [v.3]

And then we read that Saul was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord...” [Acts 9:1-2] And in all these ways, Paul thought he was offering service to God! But the key point here is that he wasn't. He was persecuting Jesus himself! Saul...“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” [Acts 9:4-5]

Jesus clearly makes the connection that when Paul persecutes his followers, he is persecuting Jesus himself. Paul makes no argument against this, because he knows that to go after his followers is to go after Jesus, for we are united with Christ and we are his.

Then, when Paul understood his folly and followed Jesus, Paul was transformed. As one commentator writes about Paul, “In addition to his new reverence for God, and new relationship to the church, Saul recognized that he had a new responsibility to the world, especially as a witness.” [Stott, 159]

And that is what he did. He preached Christ boldly! In faith, vividly aware of the consequences of his preaching, Paul preached the gospel.

He left his forceful, man-made purposes and instead followed the way of faith. Preaching the teaching, persuading and convincing through prayer and the exposition of the Word.

Love of God requires loving others, and that is what Paul's transformation led him to.

**Good Intentions are not enough**

And in contrast we see the wicked response of the Jews. They became consumed with killing Paul. They watched the gates day and night in order to kill him, and the disciples had to help him escape by lowering down in a basket through an opening in the wall!

Throughout the Scriptures we see the repeated efforts of the religious and the world to use force to stop what they considered to be wrong. In their zeal, all sorts of justifications were made. For they likely believed that the end goal justified the means. They used force, murder, false witnesses and political favors. They bribed guards and incited mobs. All of this was in an attempt to achieve their religious goals, and so they considered it to be okay to use any means necessary to achieve their purposes.

While many wouldn't dare to kill or bribe guards or plant false witnesses, there are still those who would use extreme measures to accomplish what they believe to be right. And we can find one such example in the life of Mark Driscoll.

Mark Driscoll was the lead pastor of a non-denominational church that was bursting at the seams. With around 6,000 members and 12,000 weekly visitors, this Seattle based church called Mars Hill was drawing people from one of the most unchurched areas in the USA.

But unfortunately, part of what drove that growth was a zealous man who was willing to take forceful measures to get people to fall in line with *his vision* for the church.

In Christianity Today's podcast series entitled *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, we learn of Mark Driscoll's abusive behavior. In this series, we hear audio of Mark Driscoll speaking of the firing of two elders who would not get in line with his vision. Driscoll coldly remarks that:

“There is a pile of dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus, and by God's grace it'll be a mountain by the time we're done. You either get on the bus or you get run over by the bus. Those are the options. But the bus ain't gonna stop. This is what we're doing.”<sup>1</sup>

21 pastors gathered together to bring formal charges against Mark Driscoll. They charged him with being domineering, arrogant, violent, and abusive. “In 2014, after more than a decade of tremendous growth and ministry, Mars Hill Church imploded with the resignation of its lead pastor, Mark Driscoll.”

Here in our very own neck of the PNW, was a man who while well-intentioned, let his zeal and his methods of power and force take the driver's seat, putting aside the fruits of the spirit of patience, kindness, and self-control. While he did temporarily accomplish his vision, in the process he not only took down the church, but harmed countless people in the process. In the wake of this disaster, counseling centers received droves of people who had suffered under the leadership of Mars Hill, many who have refused to ever set foot in a church again.

Clearly, zeal without knowledge and wisdom can cause a whole host of problems. Good intentions are not enough. Good motivations are not enough. Good goals are not enough.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/who-killed-mars-hill-church-mark-driscoll-rise-fa>

Paul *had been* the same way. He had been blind in his sin and transgressions. Just as Jesus had said: "... the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. [John 16:2]

And Paul was determined to bind, arrest and maybe even kill anyone who would oppose him. He felt justified because ultimately, he felt like he was serving God. But he was blind.

And Jesus showed him that the whole time he had been persecuting Jesus. He was not fighting with men, but warring with Jesus. [John Chrysostom AD 407]

And here we can see how easy it is to confuse good intentions and good goals, with God's will. Our Lord teaches us that "to obey is better than sacrifice." Rather than lean on our own understanding, and push something through – whatever it may be – God calls us to obey and to love his people. Otherwise, we may find ourselves working in the flesh and pursuing our own man-made goals.

### **Ways We Pursue Man-Made Goals – rather than God's Will**

And while we might not be breathing murderous threats, or find ourselves following in the steps of Mark Driscoll, there are many ways in which we Christians can be tempted in our own ways to return to the lifestyle of the old self and of force *over* faith. Are there ways in which you have set aside faith in order to accomplish what you believe *needs to happen*?

I think back to my early 20s and remember the ways I tried to bear everything on my own shoulders as a newly minted support-raising missionary. I remember having a tremendous zeal for the Lord, and also a tendency to want to do my best to make sure I did everything to the best of my abilities thinking that in-so-doing I could ensure we move to the mission field as soon as possible and with as little hiccups as possible along the way. After all, for me, it was extremely urgent that we get to the field so we could save souls!

We did a lot of support-raising, and looking back I realize I did my best to ensure that every letter we sent out as a couple was fine-tuned for the best impact (I'd spend hours formatting and writing these). I would ask Alicia to help me practice over and over again and rehearse what we should and shouldn't say. I would critique myself and I would critique my wife. I remember thinking that it was important for us to be raw about the mission field, but not too raw (because then people would be scared off).

We should tell them our needs, but not sound too desperate...but then again, we also need to make sure people know we need the money...but then again, we also need to make sure we only ask for money *after* we ask for prayers... and so on and so on...at the end of the day I was driving myself and driving my wife crazy.

After each presentation I felt terrible because I felt that I could have done more. I replayed everything in my mind and felt ashamed.

And it wasn't until one day a kind brother named John Burch from MTW kindly and gently asked me if I was feeling that burden because I felt the need to control and carry the weight of all these decisions on my shoulders.

He helped me to see that I had a problem...and honestly it felt like scales falling off my eyes. I was able to see all the ways in which I was trying to control everything in my life. The weight of my anxieties was crushing me, and it was then that I realized that I was trying to take by force something that only God could provide.

I realized that I was doing everything in my power to control the outcome that I believed we needed to achieve. In many sly and not-so-sly ways I was being manipulative and controlling. I was so determined to serve God to the best of my ability that I was harming my wife and myself along the way. I had turned missions into my mission, and shoved God's ways aside.

Are there ways in which we create a vision from something good...that we are convinced is from God ...and then blindly throw all we are toward achieving it? Doing whatever it takes?

Are there things that we would rather do, things that are easier to accomplish or more visible to those around us that we prefer to do, rather than to walk in faith? It is so much easier to accomplish things in the flesh, than it is to wait on the Lord.

Think of the last time you made a big decision. Getting married, changing jobs, buying a house or moving. What steps did you take?

No doubt you did the pros and cons list (at least in your head) and then sought some counsel from others. ***But how much time did you wait on the Lord? Did you wait on his timing?*** Did you spend more than a cursory amount of time in prayer?

Or did you choose to take things into your own hands – by force rather than by faith? There is no science to this, and only you can answer this, but think about your decision-making process. How often are we ok waiting in the discomfort of the unknown, and how often do we just do something in the name of the Lord and hope it works out because we can't stand waiting.

What other ways do you force your way rather than living in faith?

Are there things in your life that you consider to be good things to pursue, but which you obsess a little too much over? Things that you feel the need to do perfectly so that nothing bad will happen?

What things in your life make you anxious and/or angry? Where in life do you find yourself moving toward more of a controlling way of acting? What are you carrying on your shoulders?

Last Sunday evening we heard a powerful message on adult prodigal children. I wonder how many of us carry the weight of the salvation of our children on our shoulders believing that if only we do the right thing, or say the right thing, everything will be different. We lean on our abilities, rather than on faith.

When it comes to our children's well-being, how many of us obsess and become consumed with the thought that if they have a far better childhood than we did, or someone else did, maybe they will make all the right decisions?

When it comes to the salvation of those lost people we love dearly, be it friends or family, do you find yourself getting to the place where *though you believe* that salvation is a gift from God, you believe in your heart that their salvation really is up to you?

There is obviously a shred of truth in all these things. God does use us to be his witnesses, but in the same way that Jesus did not save everyone he encountered, neither will our witness produce salvific results 100% of the time.

And that is the thing. See, what we see in this passage is not a Paul who sits back and relaxes. But we see a Paul who leaves his forceful and heavy-handed ways behind.

Rather, he trusts – by faith- that God will use his words, his prayers and his witness to bring many to Christ.

Take a moment to look again to the final verse in this chapter, Acts 9:31. “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.”

Even here, with all the ways in which the Jews were seeking to kill Paul and destroy the church by force, what we see instead is the result of faith. We see that in the midst of the storm of persecution, God is establishing his church and his people and bringing comfort and peace!

### **Conclusion**

And as we close, I want to remind you that this is what a follower of Jesus does. He lives and acts by faith. Tonight, we are reminded to trust in the Lord's process and timing, which can often feel very slow. For God's ways are different from man's ways.

Therefore, as we go forth this week, may the words of Prov. 3 be our guide:

Prov. 3:5      Trust in the LORD with all your heart,  
                    and do not lean on your own understanding.  
6            In all your ways acknowledge him,  
                    and he will make straight your paths.  
7            Be not wise in your own eyes;  
                    fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.

Amen.

#### Sources Used In This Sermon and/or Series

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