

RELIGIOUS FANATICS

"We are fools for Christ's sake." I Corinthians 4:10.

In writing the Corinthian Christians, Paul is sarcastic and biting as he mentions their profession and their lack of possession. "For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" I Corinthians 4:7. Now notice his irony: "Now ye are full." They were not full at all; they were spiritually empty and destitute. They thought they were full, and Paul was using an ironic phrase. He says, "Now ye are full, now ye are rich, ye have reigned as kings without us: and I would to God ye did reign, that we also might reign with you. For I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honourable, but we are despised." I Corinthians 4:8-10. Can't you just feel the sarcasm in Paul's voice as he exposes them? Then he tells something of his own privations: "Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwellingplace; And labour, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it: Being defamed, we intreat: we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day. I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you."

Don't you imagine that by the time Paul had gotten that far they were ashamed? If there was anything left that had spiritual appeal within their personalities, by that time they were so ashamed they must have been hanging their heads. Then Paul wrote these lovely words: "For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me." I Corinthians 4:15-16.

Isn't it a wonderful thing that the life of the Apostle Paul was lived so consistently for Christ and his life was such a recommendation of spiritual power that he could actually say to those Corinthians, "If you want to do what is right, just do what I do. Just be followers of me. If you want to serve the Lord Jesus in the way that is going to count and send a thrill through the centuries, then do it the way I am doing it."

You know, there are very few of us who have the audacity and daring, let alone the life, to be able to say to folks today: "If you want to follow the Lord Jesus Christ the right way, if you want to live so that your life is a blazing comet, if you want to live so that it has a thrill and glory in it and so that you are winning souls, live as I do," and yet have no boast in it, no pride. Paul was humble when he said that, but he spoke truthfully.

If there is any word we are afraid of today, it is the word fanatic. If there is anything we want to run away from, and never have attached to us, it is the word fanatic. We just dread for anybody to call us fanatics. They can call us most anything else, just so it is not a fanatic.

Fanaticism is an excessive enthusiasm. It may also be defined as a passionate single-minded devotion to a cause. Any cause that has ever moved this world has been a fanatical one. Unless you are willing to be a fanatic for the Lord Jesus Christ, you will never be what He wants you to be, you will never accomplish much for Him. Real, vital Christianity should be characterized by a glorious enthusiasm. Any cause that ever made an impact upon this world has always been marked by enthusiasm, by a passion that literally drove people to spend themselves in its behalf. When we think of how the Nazi movement was saturated with enthusiasm and the way that they took a nation and sold a people on Hitler's project in one generation, we are led to ask: "Why is it that we who love the Lord Jesus Christ are not characterized by that same desperate devotion? Why is it that we do not move the world for Christ the way the Nazis moved Germany for their cause?" Well, the difference is that

they had with theirs enthusiasm, and we are lacking in enthusiasm. We need to get back and study the great driving passion that was in the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us see what that dynamic thing in Paul was that drove him to such extremity, that absolutely imperilled his life, that made him what he was, and that sent him through the centuries. What was it? We can say it in one word: it was his devotion to Jesus Christ.

You remember how the friends of Jesus Christ said that He was beside Himself. By that they meant that He was out of His mind. They meant that He had lost Himself to the cause to which He had given Himself. You remember how Festus, when the Apostle Paul stood before him, felt sorry for Paul, and he said: "Much learning doth make thee mad." That word mad does not mean that he was vexed or made angry. It means that much learning had made him a fool; much learning had made him a fanatic. He had gone too far with the thing. He had imbibed too much of it. He had gotten an obsession of which he could not rid himself. What a glorious thing it was that Paul had that magnificent obsession!

You remember how Satan virtually called Christ a fool. He took Him into the wilderness and made a proposition to Him. "If you can make stones into bread, do it! You will amaze the world by so doing." Then He took Him up to a pinnacle of the temple and showed Him the pious people kneeling on the pavement below. "Throw yourself down into their midst," said he. "You won't be hurt, and you will be hailed as the Messiah. What real pious people like is a miracle!" At last he took Him up into a high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. "You can have all that," he whispered, "if you like." "Say what you want to say. Be not righteous overmuch." But the Lord Jesus said, "Get thee behind Me, Satan," and Satan went away muttering, "A fool!"

Pilate thought Jesus Christ was a fool. Pilate was a man of the world, a man about town, spending all his time among the ideas and ambitions of the world; exhausted, jaded, disillusioned, and there standing before him was this fresh, unspoiled soul, this Jesus of Nazareth, thirty-three years of age. Pilate virtually said to Him: "Look here, don't be a fool. What are you out for, what is your line?" And the Lord Jesus answered, "I have been sent into the world to become a martyr to truth." And Pilate said, "What is truth?" It was as if he had said, "You fool, if you knew as much about men as I do, you would think twice before dying for them. You fool!"

As we study history it comes before our eyes and it throbs again and again in our hearts that the early Christians were fanatics. They were possessed of a single-minded devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. They believed with all their hearts that He was the only hope of the world. With great fervency they preached the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Paul considered it a compliment when men called him a fool, on account of his devotion to Christ. At Corinth he said, "I speak as a fool." He said, "I know what the world is going to call me. I know what I have already been called. I know what they say I am. I am a fool." Do you know why Paul enjoyed the world calling him a fool? Because he knew that if the world said he was a fool, God said he was wise. He said, "Let no man deceive himself." "Don't let anybody fool you." "If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise."

In other words, Paul said, "Let us keep our perspectives right. Let us understand that we are not to be popular with this world. It isn't that we are not to be acceptable to men. The thing is that we are to have the everlasting approval of God, and if we are going to have that, we are going to have to become fools in the eyes of the world in order that we might be wise before the eyes of the Lord." Paul said, "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved, it is the power of God." God says that even the wisest of this world are foolish unless they have first of all become wise in the eyes of God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. God is saying very simply that no man is wise who isn't first a man who knows Jesus Christ as his Saviour and is living in the will of God. That is the first mark of wisdom. That is the first point of approval, so far as God is concerned.

So you must understand, according to the Scriptures, that a man who lives for Jesus Christ, who burns up his life in the Lord's work, that man, in the eyes of the world, is a fool. That man in the eyes of the Lord is exceedingly wise and greatly loved. All of those through the ages who have identified themselves with Jesus Christ and really done something for Him, all of them have been called fools. And if you will really live your life for Christ, if you will lay it on the altar without hesitation and hold nothing back, the world will call you a fool. But, oh how wonderful! you will have Christ's approval on your life, and you will be wise.

Why do we call people fanatics. We designate people fanatics because they give themselves so wholeheartedly, so utterly and so totally to something that they do not seem to have much regard for anything else. Anybody who does that we call a fanatic. Paul gives us a glimpse of his experience along that line. He says, "Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwellingplace; And labour, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it: Being defamed, we intreat." I Corinthians 4:11-13a. In other words, Paul says to the Corinthians, "Look! The world is honoring you. The world says you are wise. But we who are really living for the Lord Jesus Christ are buffeted, bruised, beaten; we are considered as filth; yes, we are considered the scum, the offscouring of all things to this very hour. But in spite of all they do to us, we never react in any other way save as Jesus would. When we are reviled, we bless people. When we are persecuted, we endure the persecution. When we are defamed, we go right on entreating people who love the Christ Whom we love. We become fools for Christ's sake."

Paul did not need to be a fool for anybody. Nobody can question the fact that the Apostle Paul was the most gigantic intellect of his day. He was one of the most colossal figures of all time. He was a man among men. He was an outstanding personality. Doubtless he could have remained in Tarsus and lived in luxury that the city could have provided for him. He could have made great strides as far as society was concerned. Instead of living in comfort, ease and luxury, he chose, in their stead, and with his eyes wide open and his brain as clear as an unclouded sky, the beatings, the prisons, the dark and damp cells, the lonely nights, the stripes that cut his back and the blood-stained block on which he laid his head to be severed.

As long as he could have the approval of Christ, he was willing to be a fool in the eyes of every man. He just wanted to be pleasing to Christ.

The reason that Paul's life causes us to sing his praises today, the reason we think of him as the most stalwart figure in Christian preaching, the reason that he gives us the thrill that he does is because he became a fool for the Lord Jesus Christ. When the world points at us a finger of contempt and says, "You are foolish; you have gone too far with this thing, you are getting fanatical," then get alone some place and thank God, because you are in the way then where He wants you to be.

Perhaps, after Paul had that cataclysmic experience on the Damascus road, there were diplomatic persons who went to him and said, "Now Paul, you know that is a wonderful thing that has happened to you. We are all so glad. We did not think you were on the right track when you were going around murdering Christians and we are so happy now that you are all straightened out. You won't do it any more. But Paul, listen, we just want to tell you something, don't carry this thing too far. A lot of these Christians have gone so far with the thing that they are dying; some of them are being fed to the lions. Nero has murdered a lot of them, made them torches to light the city, but Paul, don't you go that far. You won't, will you? It is all right to be a Christian, just don't carry it too far." Did you ever hear that sort of talk? I have.

When they talked that way to Paul, he said, "None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself." He didn't care. Paul did not go around dodging death. He

walked right into it. He knew that when he was on the side of Christ and walking in the center of His will, he was absolutely invincible. He knew that the Lord was not going to take him home until his time was up, until He was through with his ministry. So he went right straight ahead. He had no fears, and he asked no favors. He just went with his hand in that of the Lord Jesus, and he was irresistible. He was a fool in the eyes of the world, but he was the smartest man of his day as far as God was concerned. He was living his life for Jesus Christ. He thought more of Christ than he did of comfort or safety. He fixed his eyes on Christ and that became his goal. If he had not been a fanatic for Christ, we would not hear his name.

The people applauded Nero as a wise man. They erected monuments to his honor. When he went through the streets the people crowded the curbing in order that they might just have a look at him. They said he was a wise man and Paul was a fool. But the thing has changed so much that when we look back across the centuries and look for a name for a dog, we call the dog "Nero"; but when we want to name our sons, we call them "Paul." But, if Paul had not been a religious fanatic, you never would have heard his name. You never would have known anything about him.

I suppose his townsmen took care of themselves. I suppose they were very careful to conform so that nobody would think that they were the least bit out of line. But, we do not even know who they were. We haven't a name from Tarsus. Tarsus gave the world only one name and that is the name of the man who became a fanatic for the Lord Jesus Christ.

When Pliny wrote the emperor about the early Christians, this is just about the way he said it: "Well now, these Christians are nice people, but they are headed wrong. They just don't know life. They ought to fall in our Roman ways of living, then they would know what life really is."

The world has not changed. That is what they say today. They feel sorry for folks who are out-and-out for Jesus Christ. They say, "Poor folks; they are not getting anything out of life."

If those early Christians had fallen into the Roman ways of living; if they had gone staggering down the highways of unmentionable impurity; if they had desecrated themselves in immorality; if they had done as Rome did, we never would have heard of them. They would have been swallowed up in the cesspool of their day and forgotten. But, thank God, these early Christians stood like bulwarks and Gibaltars against the sins of their day. Yes, they were persecuted, mistreated, abused, butchered, burned and murdered. There was no known method of torture that was not used on those early Christians. And yet, in the midst of it all, they never wavered in their determination to go on with the Lord Jesus Christ. They dared to be fanatics for Him.

Then, people were called fanatics because they dared to undertake the impossible. That is true in every sphere of life. Do nothing and you are prudent and wise and sensible in the eyes of the world. Dare the impossible and you are branded immediately as a fanatic. But, oh, how often history has proven that the fanatics of yesterday have become the heroes of today.

When the two Wright brothers took off on their initial flight in an airplane about forty-two years ago, everybody stayed away from them. They thought they were not normal mentally. People felt sorry for them. After their first flight a newspaper reporter wrote an article about them in which he called them, "Those crazy Wright brothers." But when we think about them today, we do not think of them as being fanatics or fools. They were fanatics then, but they are heroes today.

When Philip Reed, who suggested the idea of the telephone, went to some well-to-do business men and presented them with the idea, they all felt sorry for him, and they thought that maybe he ought to be sent to a mental institution because his idea was so fantastic. But now when we talk over the telephone across the land and over the sea, we do not think that he was such a fanatic.

If anybody ever suffered persecution as far as the opinion of the world was concerned, those early pilgrims who came to our shores from England did. Because of the intense persecution which they received, they got in a boat and started for the new world. The newspapers in England ridiculed them, said they were a bunch of fools who did not know what they were doing. They came here to found a country for the glory of God. They undertook their mission on the basis of the Christian faith. Today, we do not call them fools, but men of foresight and vision. We call them the great exponents of religious liberty in the modern era. We think of them as heroes. But, you see, if they had not been fanatics, they never would have been heroes.

To think of David Livingstone is to consider a man who dared the impossible. He went to the dark continent of Africa thinking that he never would return. He thought he was going there to plant his life for the glory of Christ. He appeared fanatical then, but we think of him now as one of the greatest missionaries the world has ever known.

It is time that we begin to dare the impossible for God. When we do, we shall win the victory. The religious fanatics of old won their victories because they went in Christ's power. They won their victories not by request, but by conquest. They went out where a price was to be paid and they paid it. And, thank God, they won. May God give us the courage to be fools in the eyes of the world that we might be wise in the eyes of Christ.