

When People Are Too Big and God is Too Small

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The Book of Galatians Series
Galatians 1:10-24

Have you ever tried to talk with someone who is really making a stupid choice about a relationship? Where you can see from the outside that the person they are relating to is just no good, is a user or an abuser? For example, a young woman is dating a guy who has a drinking or drug habit. There have been several incidents in the course of their relationship in which his substance abuse, his drinking, has led to a violent encounter or, perhaps, a car wreck, or work problems. After this dose of reality where the woman is confronted with the painful evidence of where her life will be going if she attaches herself to this man, she still says, "Well, I love him and I can't let him go."

Have you ever talked with someone who was so wrapped up in a person that they refuse to face the facts? Again, I think of a woman who is dating a physical abuser. Someone who strikes her or who is verbally abusive, demeaning, destructive. A guy who is obviously filled with rage. Maybe she has been struck and pushed. She has been assaulted or has been personally humiliated in public by slashing putdowns. You talk with her and say here are the facts about who this guy is and she says, "Well, I know, but he promises that he is going to change. You don't know the real Jim. He is really sweet and kind when he is not battering me or throwing me into walls."

Some of you think that I am uneven handed in my remarks. I have seen the same kind of unwillingness to face the fact by single men who are dating. Everyone around the man is saying, "Don't you see what she is like? She is a profoundly broken person. She is mentally ill. She is a drug user. She doesn't have the capacity to love back. She has a long track record of broken relationships or affairs." The guy says, "Oh, but underneath all of that I see something else. I just need her. I have to be with her."

Have you ever tried to talk with someone who is hooked into an incredibly unhealthy relationship and you try to disengage them? I have talked with women who fall into bed with virtually every guy they see. I try to get underneath this self-destructive pattern. I have had women say to me, "I know that I am being used, but I can't help it." "I know that my premarital sex is wrong [or my extramarital sex], but I can't seem to overcome this. I know I am offending God." But this relational pattern goes on and on.

There are, of course, lots of other ways that our relationships can be distorted beyond attachments to unhealthy people, beyond allowing ourselves to be used and abused. Some people find themselves holding another person in awe so that they cannot say "no" to the other person, no matter how unreasonable the demands are. "Immediately drop everything that you are doing and drive across town and pick me up and take me shopping."

"Well, that is not really too convenient."

“Are you going to do it or not?”

“okay, I am coming.”

“Clean my house.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Listen to my counsel, no matter how ridiculous it is.”

“okay.”

“Allow me to invade your privacy. To know intimate details of your life.”

I have seen unhealthy relationships in which one person simply held the other in awe and allowed every normal kind of boundary line to be violated. Certainly some of the greatest distortions of relationship can occur between a parent and a child, where a child is simply unable to say “no” to their parent and parental control and demands go way out of bounds, especially for the age of the child and the child’s present state.

What is at the bottom of many relational distortions? Is there any common theme running through the examples that I have just listed—the woman who won’t give up on the drug abuser; the guy who continually distorts reality in order to attach himself to a mentally sick person; the person who can’t say “no” to an overly dominating, controlling friend; the individual who has never learned to draw proper boundaries around the relationship to their parents. What all of these things have in common is that for many folks, people are too big and God is too small.

You know, in the 90’s it can really be said that drugs have been replaced by people as our idols of choice or our addictive substance. There are hundreds of books out now about co-dependency and adult people pleasing and meeting our needs for love, smart women, foolish choices, and boundary building. All the books are about distorted relationships. But at the bottom of all of this is that somehow people have become our idol of choice. People are too big in our thinking so that we really begin to believe that people are the ones who meet our needs. People are too big. And God is too small.

The passage that we are going to look at today as I continue in my series from the book of Galatians, is a passage that describes the life of a very healthy human being, whose health was continually earmarked by an enormous view of God and a much smaller view of people. As we examine the life of the apostle Paul, we are going to see that the characteristic mark of Paul’s life was that for him God was huge, people weren’t. I have borrowed my title from a book, whose review I recently read, and so my title is “When People are Big and God is Small”. Let’s pray.

Galatians 1:10-24

“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.”

The first issue that comes up in having people too big and a God who is too small is the issue of pleasing people. Let’s consider the context of this particular remark, “Am I trying to please people? If I were trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.” Remember, I told you last week, for those of you who were here, Paul planted churches in what is now South Turkey, which in those

days was South Galatia, among various groups of people, some of whom were complete pagans. And they were utterly unevangelized. Paul went into frontier missions, drew these folks to Christ, planted them in churches, left and went back to his home church in Antioch, where he received a report that some false teachers were entering the churches with a two-fold attack. They were attacking the apostolic authority saying that Paul wasn't one of the original twelve. His authority was derivative. He didn't get anything from Jesus Christ himself. He didn't walk with Christ during Christ's earthly life. Well, why should you listen to Paul?

So there was an attack on Paul's apostolic authority. They were driving a wedge between Paul and his spiritual children. And there was also an attack on his apostolic message. They were saying that Paul's message wasn't complete. That while it was true, we needed to put our faith in Christ and the grace of God was shown to us in the death and resurrection of Christ. Nevertheless, we have to supplement the death of Christ by certain things we do namely observance to Jewish law of circumcision and the food laws and so on. These false teachers said it took Christ plus something else we do in order to be acceptable before God.

Now, the false teachers were accusing the apostle Paul of short-changing the whole message. Christ, plus something you must do, in order to be saved. They were saying, "You are shortchanging the message. You are giving out a second rate gospel, Paul, in order to be a people pleaser, in order to be approved by men. The reason, Paul, you are not preaching circumcision is because you know that would be a difficult message to be accepted by folks. You are just concerned with popularity. You only want to build crowds. Paul, you are willing to say anything and do anything in order to gain a following." To update the charge, they were saying you are compromising the gospel in order to be seeker-sensitive.

The fact is that Paul never did anything in order to just gain a crowd. His goal in life was to please his Master. And while Paul loved people, people's opinions about Paul were really not that important to Paul. We see in 1 Cor. 4, for example, where the apostle Paul says, "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court. Indeed, I do not even judge myself."

Now, I think that everyone of us needs to examine the degree to which we will compromise something that we know God wants us to do or say in order to please other people. All of us need to examine the degree to which we allow ourselves to live under the thumb of others rather than the liberty of living with a solid focus upon pleasing God. There is no freedom that is like the freedom of living solely to please the Lord.

There are few people who live a free life because for most of us, people are too big and God is too small. Most of us hold someone else in such awe, such fear, and such control, that we never taste what the apostle Paul calls the glorious freedom of being the children of God.

Remember last week I told you that one of the constant themes in the book of Galatians was the theme of freedom. Well, one of the main areas of liberty that we do not talk often enough in church is being liberated, being free, from having

to live according to the opinions of others. Often, we don't enjoy our freedom in Christ because we are afraid of what others will think. We don't do certain things because of a fear that we are going to be judged or gossiped about by others. Standing in our freedom means that we resist the urge to live by the fear of what others think. I am not talking about issues of morality that are clearly laid out in the Word of God. I am talking about matters of legitimate disagreement that are purely a matter of opinion and preference.

I saw a cartoon that was a take off on one of Campus Crusade's Four Spiritual Laws. A wife was speaking to her husband who was obviously a minister. And she said to him, "God loves you and people have a wonderful plan for your life." That cartoon has captured a spirit that is widespread in conservative churches. Other people want to tell you how you should live the Christian life. What you should and should not do. And often their ideas have no overlap at all with what God is guiding you to do. I am not advocating that you run roughshod over people's convictions. We are a body and we need to be open to receiving counsel and wisdom and direction. But ultimately, we are responsible to God and not other people. He puts us in the body as he pleases and he deals with us individually, putting circumstances in our lives that are tailored to our growth and ministry.

We could not have a church like this that reaches so many folks who have been turned off to church or couldn't relate to church, if we simply catered to the scruples of every religious person in town. See, we didn't try to design a church to reach other church's members. We are not trying to please the religious people. If we were, we wouldn't be meeting inside a gymnasium. If we were just trying to reach church people, we wouldn't have electric guitars up here. If we were just trying to reach church people, we would wear suits and ties and I would probably wear robes.

Now, in no way do I feel like we are giving a cut rate message, shortchanging the truth of the cross, eliminating the hard things in order to please folks. I feel like all we are doing is changing some of the trappings, changing the wrapping paper so that people can really receive the gift of salvation that God wants to give. We are just trying to remove some of the human churchiness that gets in the way of people coming to know Christ.

Do you live subject to the opinions of others? Are you a people pleaser? Some of us would have to say we certainly live driven by the desire for someone else's approval.

I have a dear friend who spent the last 20 years of his life seeking the approval of his mother and father. This dear friend is driven in his career, driven in his purchase of houses and cars, to prove to Mom and Dad that he is a success, to gain the blessing that they were unable or unwilling to give him as a child. Do you know anyone like that? Anyone who picked a career just to please Dad or Mom with no reference to what God wanted? Anyone who still feels compelled to stay on a certain treadmill in order to finally communicate to Mom or Dad, "Look at me, I am a success. I am a worthwhile person." Or perhaps to a father-in-law or mother-in-law, or disapproving relatives. Coming to Christ is meant to free us from living according to other people's approval.

People pleasing can come out as a compromise about sharing our Christian faith and our testimony. We begin to hide our light, as Jesus says, under a bushel basket. I remember restacking my books once when I was in college so that my Bible wasn't on top, so that another book was on top of the Bible so that when I walked down the hall, people wouldn't see the Bible out on top. I remember on one occasion buttoning up my shirt so that people wouldn't see my new wooden cross. On many occasions I have reworded things so that my Christianity wouldn't be so overt, because I was in a situation where it wasn't quite so politically correct, it wasn't intellectually respectable, it seemed a little Neanderthal to be a Christian. I was identifying with people from the middle ages and the Crusades.

If you are a pleaser of people, it will come out in the way that you regularly shortchange your witness. I remember having a conversation with a professor at OSU. I was asked to have a business luncheon with some other professors after I left teaching at the University. One of the professors said to me, "Rich, how can I be a consistent Christian and share my faith without it having any effect on my career or the tenure process?"

I sort of cocked my head and looked at him and said, "Whatever made you think that you could be a Christian and it would cost you nothing?" Why do you think it wouldn't have any effect on the tenure process? The truth is that he had two Gods in his life – one was his career; the other was Jesus. And he was trying to see how he could serve both at once.

Are any of you doing that? I have frankly never met anyone who was effectively leading people to Christ which we evangelical Christians say is one of our highest values. We say we love people enough to want them to get to know the Savior and gain eternal life. I have never met anyone who was effectively leading people to Jesus who wasn't very overt and out there regarding their faith. I have never met an effective subtle witness, ever. Everyone I ever met who was effective was quite outspoken about his or her faith. I don't, in any way, mean obnoxious. I don't mean someone who was necessarily pushy or belligerent, but I mean just very overt.

Let me give you a few examples. When you are at work or in school and someone says, "What did you do last night?" and last night you went to a Bible study, do you simply say, "Oh, I went to a Bible study last night and we learned God's plan for a good marriage." Or do you say, "I got together with a couple of friends last evening." If somebody at work or at school says to you, "I have been sick for a week or two and I can't seem to shake it" do you say, "Gee, that is too bad, here's the name of my doctor." Or do you say, "Well you know, I am a Christian and God still heals people. Can I pray for you?"

There is a fellow in this church who is having enormous impact on a corporation here in central Ohio because he everyday outlines a portion of scripture and then puts it on his business e-mail. Seventy people in the company are now subscribing to his Bible studies. He told me the change in his effectiveness occurred when he became very overt about his faith and stopped seeking to please people.

Pleasing people doesn't only affect our witness, it even affects churches and what leaders are willing to talk with people about. Is our goal simply to build a large crowd or is our goal to build a community of followers of Jesus Christ? I never want to pastor a church that stops doing and saying all that the Bible does and says including the uncomfortable parts of the Bible. We are not faithful to Jesus Christ unless we occasionally discipline some of the members of our church who refuse to repent of sin after repeated warnings. We are not faithful to Jesus Christ if we don't tackle the controversial issues of our day in love with great grace and wisdom and great tact. But if a church doesn't speak to our culture about divorce or homosexuality or abortion, if there is never a message on hell and judgment, can we honestly have a clear conscience and believe that our motive is to serve God and not just to build a crowd?

Leaders, I want to personally challenge you. If you are a kinship leader or a woman's group leader, or men's group leader in this church, if you think of yourself as a maturing Christian, have you pulled the punch on something that you know you ought to be dealing in the life of a group member or a friend out of desire to please other people instead of pleasing God? In the book, whose title I took *When People are Big and God is Small*, the author suggests that much of our people pleasing are rooted in a false view of our needs. The author suggests that, especially in this last decade of the 20th Century, men and women have a grossly expanded and distorted view of what they really need. We have biological needs for food and water and air in order to live physically as long as God wants us to live on the earth. We have biological needs. We have spiritual needs. We need God's grace. We need his forgiveness. We need his power in order to live lives that glorify God so that we might enjoy him forever.

But there is a third category of needs that many of us have adopted uncritically from secular psychology. We have come to believe that we need everyone to respect us. We believe that we need to be accepted by everyone. We believe that we need to be loved by everyone. Or, that we always need to feel good about ourselves and always be comfortable. What we need is to recognize that in almost every situation of people pleasing, our so-called needs are actually sinful cravings that must be repented of so that we are able to receive God's love and grace.

Let me bring this down to earth for you. Do you remember in my introduction I talked about a woman who continually goes back to the abuser? What is the healing for her? She must repent of her craving, her sinful craving that she has been calling a need, for her boyfriend's love. It is a sinful craving, in order to be deluged by the flood of God's love and blessing. The person who is dominated by another must repent of their sinful craving for the other person's approval in order that they might receive the flood of God's love and approval. See, the little cup of our psychological needs can never contain the overwhelming flood of God's love that he wants to pour out to us if we will repent of our craving for other people's approval. But people must get smaller and God must get bigger.

Now, Paul deals with the issue of a God who is too small and people who are too big in verses 11-12 when he says:

“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.”

In order to defend his apostolic authority, Paul is saying brothers and sisters my message is not a human invention. I didn't make it up. I was not the source. Nor is my message the result of some human tradition. I didn't learn it as a student at the feet of someone else. Other people were not the source. I got this message by way of a revelation directly from Jesus Christ. In other words, the apostle Paul is saying I didn't learn about God's grace and the message I have been preaching to you in the normal ways that people learn things. I didn't learn it as a result of my own discoveries. It wasn't a product of my fertile imagination. I didn't learn about God's grace and the way of salvation by way of investigation, by doggedly looking into it. Nor did I learn about God's grace by hearing about it from someone else. I wasn't a student to someone else's teacher. I got this message not indirectly, but directly from Jesus.

If Paul were living today, he would say I didn't buy my gospel from a second hand store. I guess that is not the term anymore...in a gently used store; I got my message straight from the manufacturer, right from the Maker Himself. It wasn't something man made up and I didn't receive it from any man. He says, “Rather I received it from revelation from Jesus Christ.” Literally, that verse might read, “I received it by revelation of Jesus Christ.”

The apostle Paul was on the road to the city of Damascus. As we are going to see in a moment in verses 13-14 the reason he was headed toward Damascus was to persecute Jewish Christians who were refugees in Damascus who had fled Jerusalem and Judea in order to be able to worship Christ in freedom. He was going to be able to take them captive and drag them back to Jerusalem to stand trial before the Sanhedrin. He was going to stamp out this glowing heresy within Judaism, this Jewish-Christian heresy. When suddenly, he was apprehended by the appearance of the Risen Christ himself. The last person who Jesus Christ physically appeared to was the apostle Paul. He received not only a revelation from Christ, but also a revelation of Christ on the road to Damascus.

And what was the message he got in this revelation of Christ? Well, he got a totally new center for his religion. Before he had the revelation of Christ, Paul had a law-centered religion. The heart and soul of Paul's Jewish religion was the commandments. The way he evaluated himself was whether he obeyed the commandments. It was law-centered. But when he saw the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, he understood that salvation was wrapped up in having a Christ-centered existence. His salvation was found in Jesus Christ through Christ and through Christ alone, not through law-keeping. In his encounter with the risen Christ, he was also given a strategy, which involved going beyond the Jews to the Gentile world. He was told, in his initial commission, that he was going to bring the message to the Gentiles. And in his revelation of Christ, Paul was given insight concerning the meaning of the Christian church. Because the encounter involved Jesus asking him this question: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

And as the apostle Paul meditated deeply on the words of Jesus, he gained deeper and deeper insight into the nature of the church and realized that the Christian church was somehow intimately connected with Jesus, Himself, so that we could be said to be Jesus' body. And when someone persecutes a Christian, they are actually persecuting Jesus himself. We are in Christ and Christ is in us. All of this he got in the encounter with Christ and not by way of discussion with the other apostles.

Now that doesn't mean that Paul didn't have a discussion with the other apostles. It says in verse 18 "that after three years, [that means three years after his conversion] he 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."

So, three years later he did meet with the other apostles. I am certain that when he got together with the apostle Peter they didn't talk about the Buckeyes. How about them Bucks? I am sure they didn't spend fifteen days together talking about the weather. I expect that Paul was asking numerous questions about Peter's contact with the earthly, historic Jesus. And it was probably from Peter, during those lengthy discussions into the night, that Paul learned about the Lord's Supper, which he says he received by way of tradition in 1 Cor. 11. It was Peter who probably told him the story of how Jesus broke bread and after he had given thanks said, "this is my body which is for you". It was from Peter that he understood that when the Lord held up the cup he said, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood." It was from Peter that he probably heard many of the teachings and sayings of Jesus, which are reflected in Paul's writings.

But the heart of the gospel, salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ alone, given to us by grace alone, which we receive by faith alone – the heart and content of the gospel message was given to Paul by direct revelation and not as a result of any conversation he had with Peter or James or anyone else.

When I say that God must get bigger in our minds and people must get smaller, one of the issues that arises is authority. How much authority does this book and the apostolic message have in your life to govern your thinking and your decisions. Compare that with the authority you give your own feelings or opinions and the opinions and feelings of others. How much do you anchor your thoughts and your behavior in this book? The Protestant Reformation was largely about the issue of authority. Many people, I think, wrongly assume that the Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther was entirely about justification by faith alone. That is that we are saved by trusting in Christ and accepting salvation as a gift and not by our own works or deserving. That was one of the issues in the Protestant Reformation that Martin Luther broke free from the Catholic Church over. How is that we are saved?

But the backdrop for the discussion about how it is that we are saved really concerned the issue of authority. What or who can infallibly rule our lives? Is the infallible rule for our behavior and our beliefs the Bible alone as Luther said? Or the Bible plus the tradition of the church as the Catholic Church said? What is the authority that governs what you believe about God, about eternal life, about salvation, about heaven, about hell, about Jesus, about childraising, about

marriage, about divorce, about what you need, about what you don't need? People believe lots of things about lots of different issues. Why do you believe what you believe? Authority deals with the basis of your beliefs.

When Luther was being examined by an official of the archbishop of Trier, he had to stand up and defend the views expressed in his writings. That was the assembled hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church and the Emperor and all these powerful government officials. He was asked to repudiate the gospel that he understood from the writings of the apostle Paul based on the authority of the church. The question was put to him by his prosecutor, "Do you, Martin, answer candidly and without horns, do you now repudiate your books and the errors which they contain?"

Luther replied, "Since then your majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth, [in other words I will answer simply and directly] unless I am convinced by scripture and plain reason I do not accept the authority of Popes and councils for they have contradicted each other. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything. For to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me." My conscience is captive to the Word of God.

If you want to have God be bigger in your life, the Bible is going to have to get bigger in your life. I talk with people who say, "I am a Christian, but I don't take the words of this book very literally [they mean seriously]." I would ask people who say that they are Christians, they really are, although they don't spend much time in the Bible, they don't know the Bible very well, "Well, you know, if you are a Christian that means that you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. And if Jesus is your Lord, that means that He has authority over your life. Now tell me, in what way does Jesus exercise authority over your life and decisions and thoughts apart from what is in this book. How is it, exactly, that Jesus is your Lord if you are not deeply familiar with and submitted to what is in the book?" You will never have a big view of God, if you don't have a big view and a big apprehension of this Bible.

I would challenge you to soak yourself in the Bible. It was said of Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher, that his blood was the Bible. Or, you cut him, his blood bled the Bible. To carry around a little pocket Bible and read it frequently when you have break time at work or at school, or on the bus. Get yourself a set of Bible tapes and listen to them in the car. Start carrying around little Bible verses on index cards that you can memorize to deal with key issues in your life. I did that for years. I memorized tons of scripture. Some of you are older Christians and might want to get back to that practice saying I want to start Bible memorization again.

Big God? Little People? It comes down to the issue of authority and particularly the authority of the Bible in your life.

A big view of God also concerns the issue of conversion. Paul tells his story in Galatians 1:13-14.

"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..."

Paul discusses two aspects of his pre-Christian days. In verse 13 he talks about his persecution of the church and it was an intense persecution. It says he tried to destroy it. The word means that he literally tried to devastate it, to sack it. To destroy what an invading army would do to a city. And that intensifies the idea of the persecution.

He also showed a fanatical enthusiasm for the law. Apparently, he was entrusted with special commissions by the Jewish leaders and given a lot of responsibility and authority for someone who was quite young. The reason why Paul goes through his autobiography, and particularly his persecution of the church and his fanatical enthusiasm for the Jewish law and commandments, his scrupulous following of all of the teachings of the rabbis, is that Paul is saying that I was not psychologically predisposed to becoming a Christian. I was not looking for Christ. I was not facing some moral crisis. I was not one of those who was unhappy with life, tormented inside. In the first half of this century it was very popular to write books on the psychology of Paul. It was quite popular to write books on the psychology of Paul and how he was tortured by guilt or by a sense of failure in his obedience to the law. There isn't a drop of truth in that at all. Paul is saying there was nothing in me that led to my conversion.

The apostle Paul says that his feeling regarding his obedience to the law was in Phil. 3, "as to the law he was blameless." He was totally content with who he was and where he was going. He was advancing beyond everyone else. He was on the fast track toward rabbinic scholarship. What accounts for the radical change in the life of the apostle Paul? Not his psychological predisposition. Not his family background. To Paul, people were insignificant in his conversion.

Look at the incredible contrast Paul draws. You can see it in the pronouns. He says in verse 13, "I persecuted the church of God. I was advancing in Judaism beyond my many years. I will tell you what I achieved on my own. I tried to destroy Jesus' church. I was committed to a whole different understanding of how it is that you could please God. That is what I did."

And then in verse 15 he contrasts "what I did" with "what God did". But when God, who set me apart forever, and God called me by his grace; and God was pleased to reveal his Son in me. He is contrasting I-I-I with God-God-God. You talk about a big view of God and a little view of man. When it comes to salvation, Paul is saying the only thing that I brought to Christ was my sin.

Many of you are at this point where you are considering whether to give yourself to Christ. And I have heard excuses ranging from "I don't know if I am sincere enough." I have heard people delay because they don't know if they have the follow through. Maybe you are someone like that? I don't know if I can live the Christian life. I don't know if I can pull it off. I made false starts before. Some of us feel like we are not good enough.

Let me tell you something. You don't come to Christ and bring to the table your sincerity. You don't come to Christ and bring to the table your determination to follow through. You don't come to Christ and bring your goodness. The only

thing you bring to Christ is your sin. God gives the salvation. God supplies everything including the faith. You come with your brokenness and God gives it all as a gift. It is based on nothing in us.

Friends, you need to see that in verse 15 where the apostle Paul says, "But when God, who set me apart from birth..." That was before I did anything good or bad, or thought anything good or bad or was sincere or insincere.

Why is it that God gave salvation to Paul, the persecutor of the church, and not to Pilate the killer of Jesus? Why is it that some of you have faith in Jesus Christ and your friends don't or some of your family members don't? Did you exercise faith in Christ because you are more intelligent than they are? Did you respond positively to the gospel because you are more spiritually sensitive than someone else? If you ever look inside and say there was anything in you or of you that was the reason why you received salvation, you have fallen into the grossest form of legalism and an enormous monument to your pride. Because you are trusting in yourself and your own work and not in Christ alone. There is a doctrine that the reformed part of the church has labeled as "Unconditional Election" which I hold near and dear. Unconditional election means that there is nothing in us foreseen or otherwise that caused us to be saved or chosen. Salvation is solely an action of God's grace. Paul says he was set apart before he was born.

Many people would say, "Well, certainly, it is not a matter of my intelligence or some virtue that I responded positively." But maybe the reason why some people respond favorably to the gospel and others don't is because they see their need more than others. Why do some people see their need for Christ better than others? Are they more humble than others? Are they somehow less prejudiced toward Christ, less hostile? Less of an enemy of God? Sooner or later it comes down to a simple choice. Either a person is saved because of some virtue in them or they are saved purely as a gift of God and even the very faith in a person is a gift from God. Either God does it all in salvation, it's grace from beginning to end, or else it's 99.9% grace but we contribute a sense of our need or our desire or our follow through. Your conversion as you meditate on it ought to result in an enormous view of God.

The last thing that we see when we are considering how big God is relative to people is whether a person writes their life story after an encounter with God. And I would say that one of the best tests of whether a person really has been converted, that is whether a person really has come into an encounter with big G-God is the rethinking, the retelling, the rewriting of their life story. What you see in the apostle Paul over and over again is a complete reorientation of his life story so that what formally made him proud now makes him ashamed. And what he formally counted as weakness and loss, he now counts as his only saving virtues.

The first thing that you hear from the mouth of a new disciple of Christ is a retelling of their life story. The past is read through an entirely different lens. Often times you will hear a person say that their accomplishments were really obstacles in the way of finding Jesus. Things they used to be proud of, their rewards, athletic letters, degrees, and money got in the way. They are not so

proud of that stuff because now they have found Big God. Before they came to Christ their sins may have seemed like little blips on their radar screen, minor errors or mistakes or indiscretions. But now in the light of Jesus Christ and encountering his holiness, those little blips look like Mt. Everest. A level one indiscretion now looms as a level 10 major sin.

Let me underline this for you. I would go so far as to say that a person could have serious doubts about whether they are really converted if the way they tell their life story has not significantly changed after meeting Jesus Christ. If your life story sounds exactly the way you would have told it in the past and with the only addition, "I met Jesus", you might ask yourself if you have really met the real Jesus or some little God, some no God at all.

Let me put it this way, I have never met anyone who has met the real Christ and really been converted who says, "I am glad I waited this long to be saved and to clean up my act because I got to party and sleep with lots of people and do what I wanted to do. Now that I am old and can't do all that stuff anymore, I guess the only thing left for me was Christ. So I am glad I waited a long time and delayed this as long as possible. So now I have had my cake and I get to eat it too."

That is the popular non-Christian view. Don't waste your youth on Jesus. Fool around and when you are too old accept Christ. But I have never met anyone who has accepted Christ who didn't deeply regret all the time they spent away from him. People who meet Big God say, "I could have had the banquet and instead I was sitting around eating mud pies."

Do you read everything in your past differently because you have encountered Jesus? I might go so far as to say that the depth of your conversion is proportionate to the depth of your rewriting of your past – all of it, all the pain, all the abuse, all the sin, all the accomplishments all the ways your parents related to you. It is all retold because you have met Big-G God.

Who would have thought that we would have lived through a week like this past week? Where a woman named Monica Lewinsky would push the Unabomber and the Pope and the Middle East peace talks and the Super Bowl out of the headlines. No one is talking about Ted Kazinsky. Very few people are standing around the water cooler talking about the Super Bowl or the Pope's visit to Cuba. Everyone has been talking about whether President Clinton had an affair and then urged a woman almost 30 years younger than him to lie about it.

And this week has led me to think about the last Presidential scandal involving Richard Nixon and Watergate. I want to close with the story of a man who rewrote his life story in light of an encounter with God. The man that I am talking about is Chuck Colson who was Nixon's hatchet man. Colson was the man Nixon gave all the dirty jobs to and who was the master of dirty tricks. The man who planned the break-in of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office and smeared Nixon's opponents.

Colson tells of a night when he sat down with Tom Phillips, the President of Raytheon Corporation. Colson was under fire from the Erwin Committee and the Senate Committee investigating the Watergate break-in. And Tom Phillips briefly reviewed his past, his rise to power at Raytheon, that he was VP at 37 and

President when he was 40. He did it with hard work both day and night. He said the success came, but something was missing.

"I felt this terrible emptiness Chuck. I would get up in the middle of the night and pace the floor of my bedroom and stare out into the darkness for hours."

Colson said, "I don't understand, Tom. I knew you in those days. You were a straight arrow, a good family man. I thought everything was going your way."

Tom said, "That might be true, Chuck, but my life wasn't complete. I would go to the office day after day striving to make the company succeed. But there was a big hole in my life. There was something terribly missing. I began to read the scriptures looking for answers. Something made me realize I needed a personal relationship with God."

Colson said, "A prickly feeling ran down my spine. Maybe what I was going through the past several months wasn't so unusual at all. I had not sought spiritual answers. I hadn't even been aware that finding a personal relationship with God was possible. I pressed him to explain the contradiction between the emptiness inside while seeming to enjoy the affluent life."

Tom Phillips said, "It may be hard to understand, but I didn't have anything that really mattered. It was all on the surface. All the material things in life are meaningless if a man hasn't discovered what is underneath him." All the material things will never fill the hole in your soul that only God can fill.

Phillips said, "One night I was in New York on a business trip. I noticed Billy Graham was having a crusade. I went hoping I would find answers. What Graham said that night put it all into place for me. I saw what was missing – a personal relationship with Christ. I asked Christ into my life. I hadn't turned my life over to him before. I did it that night and that is where it all started."

And then Tom turned to Chuck Colson's situation. Colson described the agonies of Watergate and the pressures he was under, how unfairly the press was treating him. And then Tom spoke to him frankly. He said, "You know, I supported Nixon in his last election, but you guys made a mistake. You would have won the election without any of the hanky-panky. Watergate and the dirty tricks were so unnecessary. It was wrong. It was just plain wrong. If only you had believed in the rightness of your cause none of this would have been necessary. None of this would have happened. The problem with all of you, including you Chuck, is that you had to destroy the other guy. You had to destroy your enemies. You destroyed them because you didn't trust in God."

Then Tom went in for the kill. He said, "Chuck, I hate to say this, but you brought it on yourself. If you had put your faith in God, if your cause was just, he would have guided you. His help would have been a thousand times more powerful than all your phony ads and your shady schemes put together."

And then Tom Phillips read him a passage from C.S. Lewis' book, *Mere Christianity*, which reads this way, "It is pride which has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and in every family since the world began. Other vices may bring people together. You may find good fellowship, jokes and friendliness among drunken people, or unchaste people. But pride always means enmity. And not only enmity between man and man, but also enmity between man and God. And in God you come up against something that in every respect is

immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that, and therefore know yourself as nothing in comparison, you do not know God at all.”

In other words, unless you know God as very big and yourself as very small, you do not know God.

Colson said, “Suddenly, I felt naked and unclean. My bravado defenses were gone. I was exposed, unprotected, for C.S. Lewis’ words were describing me. That passage just seemed to sum up my whole life in the White House. And I wonder if this passage doesn’t sum up life in the White House this very day. Pride is a spiritual cancer. It eats up the very possibility of love, contentment, or even common sense.”

And then Colson said a whole series of incidents from his life began rolling in his mind and he began rethinking everything in terms of this one issue: pride. He saw that the whole reason he took his job in the White House and everything he did was because of pride. And suddenly he felt very ashamed. One incident particularly came to mind. A reporter came to his office one day, hat in hand. He had been an adversary of the Nixon White House and now he needed Nixon’s good graces. He came to Colson and said, “Chuck, what can I do to get back into the good graces of this administration.” Colson, the victor, stood over him and smugly said to him, “Well, you could slash your wrists.”

He said a thousand incidents like that came to his mind. He realized the horror of his life, how it was built on nothing but pride and he realized his desperate need for God.

Real conversion is always going to be marked by a rewriting of your past. That is the test. Big people and a little God or little people and a big God? Let me ask you some questions in closing. Are you a people-pleaser? Do you hold anyone in awe? Is one of your relationships marked by sinful craving for approval, respect, and neediness? If so, repent so you can rewrite your life. Is the Bible your authority? Do you drench yourself with the thought in this book? Do you attribute your entire conversion to God? Do you see you gave Christ nothing and brought nothing except your sin? Have you re-written your life story in light of encountering God?