

May God's Reputation Precede Us  
Galatians 1:11-24  
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“Regard your good name as the richest jewel you can possibly be possessed of – for credit is like fire; when once you have kindled it you may easily preserve it, but if you once extinguish it, you will find it an arduous task to rekindle it again. The way to a good reputation is to endeavor to be what you desire to appear.” So said the philosopher Socrates, many, many years ago. And that wisdom seems to be no less true today. It is possible to come back from a scandal, to regain some measure of a lost credibility, but I think most people who have had to take that hard road back would agree they wish they'd never gone down it. These days, with all the ways we have of reporting and receiving news, not even the slightest slip of a tongue goes unnoticed, which is not necessarily a bad thing, unless you are the one making the mistake. In the long run, it may even make you a better person, if you can learn from your mistakes. But in the short run, rekindling that flame is indeed challenging.

The Apostle Paul was likewise concerned with his reputation, with his “street cred” you might say, and in his letters, we frequently find him making the case for why he, and the message he brings, are trustworthy. On one hand, we might infer that there was a lot of suspicion in the early church, that people weren't always quite so willing to trust one another, and so one always had to reestablish

why one should be listened too. But on the other hand, maybe it was because the whole thing was so new, that there wasn't a history book to fall back on, no lineage to rely on to evaluate whether someone was telling you the truth. Anyone could be making up whatever they wanted, quoting Jesus however they wished to try to make a name for themselves, establish their reputation on whatever basis might be available to them, right, wrong, or convenient. There might even have been some money to make in there somewhere, and that can always lead to some questionable practices. Indeed, Paul smells a rat, as they say, among the churches of Galatia, that something is wrong there, and the purpose of his letter is to put them straight about the Gospel of Jesus Christ that he has brought them, and how others are distorting the message he brought. But before he can set them straight theologically, he must remind them about why he can be trusted. He must rekindle his reputation in the ears, and so he tells again his story of how he came to be the Apostle to the Gentiles, the one God sent to proclaim Christ's message among those who had not come from Christ's people.

Paul was a very clever man. In this pretty short part of Galatians we read tonight, he offers three pretty compelling reasons why he should be trusted, three reasons which we might also find valuable as we seek to keep our reputations burning. Yes, our reputations do mean something. Although I'm inclined to agree with the American author Margaret Mitchell who once said, "With enough courage, you can do without a reputation," most of us are not really that

courageous, and we need something to fall back on. Paul was certainly courageous, both before and after his conversion, but he too found it useful and necessary to build and maintain his reputation both before and after his conversion. And that is what he is doing here.

First, Paul reminds his readers of the source of his truth, and lays claim to a greater reputation than any other one out there. “I want you to know,” he says, “that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” If you want to hear the details of the story of Paul’s encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, you will find it for the first time in the book of Acts, chapter nine. But for tonight, let us simply take note that what Paul is trying to do is deflect any criticism that he is in anybody’s camp besides God’s. His reputation depends on no one else’s. He is his own man because God gave him his own message, though the message was certainly consistent with everything previously said by Jesus. But he does not want to be identified with anyone else’s perspective on the Gospel, so that no one can accuse him of having the wrong motives. So if the people in Galatia had any opinions about Peter or James or anybody else, Paul creates a distance from everyone else’s reputation, so that his might stand on its own.

That’s actually a pretty uncommon thing, if you think about it. Most of the time, we are pretty quick to drop names in our own attempts to build our

credibility. Whether we mention our favorite authors or entertainers or sports heroes, we often do that to let others know where we stand, and with whom we stand, to kind of give others a chance to evaluate us, and to perhaps find an affinity with us. The reputations of others help build our own. To be sure, we sometimes do that to give credit where credit is due. I'm not interested in plagiarizing anyone's ideas, and making others think they are my own. But if we are honest, I think we can safely say that when we invoke someone else, there is a hope that some of what helps them shine rubs off on us, so that we might shine a little brighter. That approach, of course, has its risks, for what shines one day may tarnish the next, and tarnish rubs off just as easily as shine. Paul sidesteps all of that with his claim to Christ's direct revelation. But that's not quite so easy for us to do, however. That hasn't happened to me lately, at least. My information about the Gospel is mediated by two millennia of time, a lot of cultural baggage, and maybe most of all by my own limitations, and so I can't make the same claim as Paul. But I can do my best to be my own thinker about matters of faith and truth, to be critical of the claims made about the message of Jesus, to wrestle with them and recognize that the truth I receive is mediated by the reputations of others, and all that implies, and therefore to choose very carefully whom I will trust. It's a lot more work this way than blindly following someone because what they say about Christ sounds convincing, but if Paul's claim means anything still today, it must be that skepticism is worth the effort.

So whom can you trust? Whose reputation is worth staking your own on? Well, those questions are informed by the second reason Paul gives for why he should be trusted. And that reason is that he took the truth he had received and made it his own. He took it to the desert, to lonely places, to quiet places. He put it in conversation with the life he had been leading, and the life God was calling him to lead from then on. He did not immediately presume to have all the answers, but let them be worked out over time. These days, a lot of stray thoughts make their way to Twitter and Facebook almost before they are fully formed. And many of those stray thoughts lead to tarnished reputations. But Paul takes his sweet time in announcing what has happened to him. Certainly the world for Christians becoming a safer place without the guy who was formerly known as Saul would have made news quickly, but the fact of the change of Saul's heart and his name was probably known to just a handful of people, and the depth of it to even fewer. No, Paul takes the time to put his revelation into context, of what he has known and learned, what he sees around him. Then, and only then, is he ready to meet the VIPs of the faith. One of my favorite expressions seems to have applied here, that it is better to be silent and thought a fool than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt. Paul had a huge reputation to overcome, as one who persecuted the church. How would he have been received, even with the truth coming directly from Christ, had he broadcast immediately his experience? He would have sacrificed the ministry to which Christ had called him to the suspicion people would have had

that he was simply trying to repair his reputation, maybe even to be able to infiltrate the church to continue his persecution. Wisely, Paul left aside his need to repent of what he had done, for the sake of what he would one day do. He let his own reputation suffer, for the sake of Christ's. He let years go by with everyone continuing to believe he was a bad guy, the only testimony to the contrary that he was no longer presiding over more executions. I, for one, would have wanted everyone to know I was sorry for what I had done, for them to know that I was a changed person. But not Paul. Not yet. And that would seem to be a helpful way for us to think about whom we will trust as a bringer of the truth. When we look at all the people claiming to speak for God, who are the ones who are willing to let their own reputations take a back seat to God's reputation?

Which leads us to the last of the reasons that Paul claims that he can be trusted, and the one which may be most instructive for us. It's a one-liner, but it may as well be a book: "And they glorified God because of me," which means they gave glory to God, they attributed this change in Paul's life to God's glory, not his own will or intelligence or even his zeal. In Paul's story, the church did not simply see a case of someone who by hard work had made it back into God's good graces, but someone who because of God's good grace had been called to do hard work. Paul himself, we are to believe, did not become the object of praise for what had taken place, but rather God had. The focus for Paul, at the expense of any other, was God's glory, for without it there is no revelation, there is no truth, there is no

good news. Without God's glory there is nothing but the need for a good reputation, and whatever limited and fleeting value reputation can muster, if any. Paul saw how far the pursuit of a reputation for its own sake got him; no further than violence and bloodshed, and no closer to God. So much of our effort to maintain a good reputation is to establish our own glory, what others will think about us. But that is nothing more than vanity, and it distracts from the truth we claim to offer.

More than one person has linked reputation with character. D.L. Moody noted, "If I take care of my character, my reputation will take care of itself," while Shannon Alder fleshes that out by saying, "Reputation is what others think of us; character is what God knows of us. When you have spent what feels like eternity trying to repair a few moments of time that destroyed the view others once had of you then you must ask yourself if you have the problem or is it really them? God doesn't make us try so hard...only enemies do." What are we to think about the idea of our reputation? Let me suggest that our reputation is important only insofar as it leads to Paul's concluding statement, that they glorified *God* because of him. There can be no other driver of our behavior.

I want to conclude with a tale by the nineteenth century French statesman and writer Alphonse Lamartine. In the tribe of Neggdeh, there was a horse, whose name was spread far and near, and a Bedouin of another tribe, by name Daher, desired extremely to possess it. Having offered in vain for it his camels and his

whole wealth, he hit at length upon the following device, by which he hoped to gain the object of his desire. He resolved to stain his face with the juice of an herb, to cloth himself in rags, to tie his legs and neck together, so as to appear like a lame beggar. Thus equipped, he went to wait for Naber, the owner of the horse, who he knew was to pass that way. When he saw Naber approaching on his beautiful steed, he cried out in a weak voice. "I am a poor stranger; for three days I have been unable to move from this spot to seek for food. I am dying, help me, and heaven will reward you." The Bedouin kindly offered to take him up on his horse and carry him home; but the rogue replied, "I cannot rise; I have no strength left." Naber, touched with pity, dismounted, led his horse to the spot, and with great difficulty, set the seeming beggar on its back. But no sooner did Daher feel himself in the saddle, than he set spurs to the horse, and galloped off, calling out as he did so, "It is I, Daher. I have got the horse, and am off with it." Naber called after him to stop and listen. Certain of not being pursued, he turned, and halted at a short distance from Naber, who was armed a spear. "You have taken my horse," said the latter. "Since heaven has willed it, I wish you joy of it; but I do conjure you never to tell any one how you obtained it." — "And why not?" said Daher. "Because," said the noble Arab, "another man might be really ill and men would fear to help him. You would be the cause of many refusing to perform an act of charity, for fear of being duped as I have been." Struck with shame at these words, Daher was silent for a moment, then, springing from the horse, returned it to its owner,

embracing him. Naber made him accompany him to his tent, where they spent a few days together, and became fast friends for life.

This story surprises us with its ending, which we first assume will be either a vow of retribution or another step in the rivalry, or an attempt to preserve his reputation. But instead, Naber's character shines through, placing the emphasis on the truly important thing, rather than on his own needs and desires, and his reputation then shines even brighter. This is what Paul has done in our passage tonight. This is what we must do as a church and as Christians. This is what the world needs so desperately. This is what only Christ can help us do. Amen.