

ON A ROAD CALLED DAMASCUS
Two part sermon series: "Being Led by God"
Acts 9: 1-9 August 5, 2018
The Church of the Covenant

So I park in a part of the Giant Eagle parking lot that I never park in, and am delayed getting to my car, and there appears someone walking across the parking lot who I have been praying for a lot just recently. Even I know this is a God appointment and God is about to use me in some cool way. It was not an accident. It was not random. I was directed by the Holy Spirit to be there and to have the conversation I had. Being led by God, having the Holy Spirit lead you, is the antidote for legalism, all the wouda, coulda and shoudas in life that rob you of joy and happiness. When we get off a road called Damascus, when we move from legalism to grace, when we move from performance based religiosity to a life-giving relationship in Christ, then we have what Jesus Christ was sent into the world to give us. The Apostle experienced this ON A ROAD CALLED DAMASCUS. Mine was far more sedate...in a PARKING LOT CALLED GIANT EAGLE...

What is legalism? Legalism is a rule-based religiosity. It is lists of what you should do and what you shouldn't do. These lists are always in our mind, often coming from our families, but mostly coming from us. We set for ourselves impossible standards that we never can meet and so are inherently unhappy. We buy into the trap of a performance based love. IF I do everything correctly THEN I will be blessed and loved and have joy. IF I meet your needs THEN you will like me. IF I never fail or falter THEN Lord You have to love me and let me get into heaven. Legalism says things like this to itself –“If I just tried a little harder then...” OR “If I was just a little better then...” OR “If I was just a little thinner...just a little smarter...never ever made a mistake then” Then I would have the happiness and joy that I have always wanted in my life. I would lead the life I have always wanted to lead. Legalists are also perfectionists. Not only do we hold ourselves to impossibly high standards but if we err even in the slightest then we have failed utterly and entirely and are no good whatsoever. We also think that if we are just good enough that then God has to answer our prayers the way we want Him to. And if for whatever reason He doesn't then we assume He hates us and is judging us somehow. Perfectionists and legalists finally get ourselves to the place where we may turn our back on God, angry because He doesn't do what we want Him to do, and just sure somehow we have done something wrong to merit it. Why am I an expert on legalism? Because on some level I am a legalist, a perfectionist, holding myself to impossibly high standards and seeking to buy myself into heaven by my good deeds. But at some point you have to get off the road of legalism. You have to get off the road called Damascus. You have to accept the grace that God offers in His Son. Let go and let God. Please.

By the way, you know all those lists of things you're supposed to do and be you get on the internet every day? Be nice. Be kind. Say nice words. Be mindful. Do random acts of kindness. Its all legalism. Its all lists of things you are supposed to do and be. I couldn't do half of what is sent to me every day on Facebook let alone accumulate all the ought to and shouldas and try to live my life that way. Christianity, as opposed to internet religiosity, is the only world religion that is NOT about legalism and lists of things to do and be. It is about GRACE. It is about God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. It is about a RELATIONSHIP with Jesus Christ where He leads and directs and guides us in life through His Holy Spirit. What are you supposed to do? Who are you supposed to be? Follow HIM today and you'll know TODAY. Right there in the Giant Eagle parking lot.

See, I understand Saul (soon to be the Apostle Paul). I get trying to be good. I get wanting to be the good son. I understand on a very deep experiential level trying harder and harder to be a good person. And failing every time. Saul who becomes Paul, is the Pharisee of Pharisees, the legalist of legalists. His teacher is the greatest Jewish scholar of his age, Gamaliel. He keeps the law like a strict Pharisee. In point of fact

he is so zealous in his adherence to the law he feels that this new sect of Christianity is a threat to the law, it undermines legalism, and so must be attacked and stopped before it undermines the law. Paul is responsible for the death of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. He has put the crowd up to stoning him and is “consenting to his death”. He has received letters from the Jewish authorities to travel to Damascus to persecute Christians, kill them if need be, and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains for trial. His legalistic reading of the Ten Commandments does not conclude as Jesus concluded –You are to love the Lord your God and you are to love your neighbor as yourself—his conclusion is that you are to kill people who you perceive as threats to the law. One sees LOVE. One sees DEATH. Legalism leads to death –death of the soul. And ironically, death to the soul of the person who is a legalist. Legalism sucks the joy out of life. It is soul-killing and life-killing and faith-killing. Get off the Road called Damascus. Get on a highway of grace that leads to life!

So Saul, soon to be Paul, is making his way on the Road to Damascus to persecute Christians. And a light descends and he is blinded and falls off his horse. And he hears a voice. And the voice he hears is Jesus. He hears, “*Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?*” and Saul responds with a question, “*Who are you, Lord?*” (Acts 9: 5) Note that the Pharisee of Pharisees doesn’t ask the legal question –“What am I to do?” or “Who am I to be?” He asks, “*Who are you, Lord?*” He asks the relationship question. He asks the WHO question. Christianity, as opposed to all other world religions, asks the WHO question, the relationship question. Our life of faith is the constant asking of the Lord Jesus, “WHO ARE YOU?” And as we learn more and more about Jesus, and we learn more and more about the ways of God, and our heart is tuned more and more to follow Him by following the nudges of the Holy Spirit in our lives, guess what? Each day we figure out more and more who this Jesus is and why He has called our name, and why He has asked us to get off the road of legalism and onto a highway of wholeness and health and grace and life, following Him. Get off the Road Called Damascus and get on to following the One who is “*The way, the truth and the life.*” (John 14: 6)

When I was in law school I had a profound religious experience. There was something about the law for me personally that was soul-killing. I have always been blessed with congregations filled with attorneys and I honor you all for being able to do what I could not do personally and to be able to keep your integrity in the process. But the Lord came to me in law school and bid me become a minister, a different sort of advocate, if you will. I always personally struggle with legalism in my life. Every day I wake up and there are the 10,000 good things I SHOULD DO today. But only a handful of them that I can actually do. What should I do? What can I do? I must follow Jesus and as I pray to God and ask Jesus to lead me and as the Holy Spirit nudges me what I am to do and what I am to allow God to accomplish in other ways, I understand better and better the GRACE that God sent into the world, for me and for you, through His Son, Jesus. It is a different and a better road to walk. It is why my Bible life verses, which are inscribed in my seminary ring given me by my dear parents in 1983, it is why it quotes 2 Corinthians 3: 5-6 –“*The letter of the law kills, but the Spirit gives life.*”

Whatever road you’re walking today, come to this table, and have a personal, spiritual encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ through this sacrament. Saul asked: “*Who are you, Lord?*” And then the Pharisee of Pharisees became the Apostle of GRACE and spent the whole rest of his life figuring out the answer to his question. A road called Damascus or a road called GRACE? Which is it for you? Amen and Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*