

**SERIES: Power through Weakness**  
**SERMON: Reasonable Fanaticism**  
**SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 6:3-10**  
**SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus**  
**DATE: December 11, 2005**

I have an article you may have read, but it's worth hearing again, entitled, "*It's a Strange World.*"

*"Shy sedate, conservative, normally very quiet people scream at the top of their lungs, yell obscenities at the umpire, jump up and down, hug the person sitting next to them whom they have never seen before in their lives, and we call them fans!*

*Hundreds of thousands of people endure sub-freezing temperatures, and wind-driven rain, sleet, or snow. They bake in a heat-exhausting sun; they sweat, they pass out, they get sick—all to cheer on their team of spoiled millionaires, and we call them fans!*

*Sitting in the stands at a Green Bay Packers football game are a group of young men with their shirts off. The temperature is 15 degrees below zero and the wind is blowing 30 mph. Somehow their exposed chests communicate enthusiasm for their team, and we call them fans!*

*They decry the evils of television, yet they watch it from three to eight hours at a time if their favorite team is playing. Early-to-bed-early-to-rise people have been known to stay up until 2:00 am to see if their team can pull it out in the last inning, and we call them fans!*

*School children and teachers alike cut classes, faithful employees with exemplary work records call in sick, people throw shredded paper out of buildings, hundreds of thousands of average humanity parade for miles behind a caravan of trucks carrying the World Series champs, and we call them fans!*

*They cry when their team loses and cry when they win; they carry elaborate signs saying "We love You, Roger Clemens" or "Albert Pujols for President," they pay thousands of dollars for next years' season tickets, and we call them fans!*

*They go to church for an hour or so on Sunday. They read their Bibles, they believe in God as Creator, they volunteer to help the poor, they bow their heads to say grace at meals, they lift their hands in worship, they talk to other people about Jesus, and we call them fanatics!"*

It's a strange world, alright!

In case you hadn't noticed, our society has developed a habit of labeling anyone who takes a view that goes against the conventional wisdom "a crazy fanatic," especially if they hold a traditional or conservative position. Thus people who oppose abortion on demand, even partial birth abortion, are fanatics. So are those who would appreciate just a little humility and honesty in the science curriculum of our public schools. And those who object when WalMart and Target remove "Merry Christmas" from all their advertising. And those who wish to protect their children's minds and hearts by home schooling them.

And isn't it interesting how the media lumps Protestant fundamentalists, who reject violence and teach that we should love even our enemies, into the same camp with Muslim fundamentalists who openly urge their followers to kill all Jews and Christians, including women and children—and calls them all religious fanatics. It is a strange world indeed.

But this situation is not totally unique. Committed Christians today are not the first to be labeled fanatics, or worse. The Apostle Paul was frequently accused of being crazy. Last Sunday we noted in chapter 5, verse 13 of 2 Corinthians that he wrote, "If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God." He wouldn't have written that if it weren't the case that some people were alleging that he was indeed out of his mind. Some people undoubtedly heard the testimony of his remarkable conversion on the Damascus Road, saw how his dedication to Christ caused him to sacrifice so many of the comforts and pleasures of life, and they concluded he was crazy. In Acts 26:24, when Paul was on trial before King Agrippa, his testimony about the resurrection was interrupted by Porcius Festus who shouted at him, "You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane."

But Paul knew he was not alone in being considered a crazy fanatic. After all, Jesus Himself endured similar treatment. In John 10:20 it says that many of the Jews said of Jesus, "he is demon possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" Even his family concluded he was imbalanced and came to take him home because they said, "He is out of his mind" (Mark 3:21).

Who is really a fanatic, and who is simply deeply committed to the truth? Or can you be both at the same time? I want you to turn with me to our Scripture text today, 2 Cor. 6:3-10. In these eight verses we are going to see what I like to call the biography of a reasonable fanatic:

*We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the prince of preachers in 19<sup>th</sup> century London made a cogent response one day when he was told by a religious liberal that Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road was really caused by an epileptic fit. He said, "Oh, blessed epilepsy! Would that every man in London could experience epilepsy like that!"<sup>i</sup> Likewise, if Paul is exhibiting fanaticism here, would that every one of us were fanatics! In fact, what Paul is exhibiting here is actually a God-honoring life of the first order. If it makes him look like a crazy fanatic to us, that only shows how distorted our concept of true discipleship really is.

Now the autobiographical catalog of things Paul mentions here defies easy categorization. Some of the items in his list are terrible things done to him or that he voluntarily accepted; others are wonderful character qualities the Holy Spirit has built into his life; others are spiritual resources he uses in his ministry; and still others are profound paradoxes. What they all have in common is that they demonstrate how absolutely committed (fanatical, if you will), he was to Christ and to the call of God on his life.

**The reasonable fanatic avoids putting any obstacles in a person's path that may hinder him from coming to faith in Christ. (6:3)**

Crazy fanatics, as opposed to reasonable ones, don't worry about that. Whether you're talking about Muslim jihadists who blow up a wedding party, or so-called Christian fundamentalists who stand on street corners holding up signs that say "God hates fags," these people couldn't care less who they hurt or what obstacles they put in anyone's path to God. They have a single-minded obsession that has blinded them to reason or truth or morality. They will say anything or do anything to get media attention and to force their will on others. Paul absolutely rejects that philosophy. He writes, "We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited." He uses two strongly negative expressions here in the original language, meaning "no stumbling block whatever."

Now please understand that Paul knows that the Gospel itself is a stumbling block to some. He himself writes in 1 Cor. 1:23ff, ". . . we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jew and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." Paul can't do anything about the fact that the truth itself is a stumbling block, but he can sure avoid putting unnecessary stumbling blocks in people's paths. Like what?

**1. We can create obstacles to faith when we are dogmatic about issues on which intelligent, godly people differ.** For example, I think we hinder people from coming to faith in Christ when we are dogmatic about such things as the mode of baptism, the time of the rapture, the age of the earth, or the Calvinist/Arminian controversy. There's nothing wrong with holding a particular view, and there's nothing wrong with teaching that view; but can't we have a little humility when there are people far smarter than we and who hold to all the essentials of the faith, and yet take a different view on these matters? The Free Church was founded on an ancient principle: "in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things charity."<sup>iii</sup> This is not an apologetic for sloppy thinking or wishy-washy tolerance. But it is an appeal for balance and humility.

**2. We can create obstacles to faith (and thus end up discrediting our ministry) when we behave in ungodly ways**—moral failure, financial irresponsibility, unfair business practices. Every time a Christian leader goes down the tubes morally, it gives the enemies of the Cross fodder for ridicule and gives marginal Christians an excuse to bail out. One writer put it this way: "One of the things that drowns out the message of reconciliation is the bad example of those of us who profess to follow Jesus, but then do not live like it. We end up being walking

contradictions.”<sup>iii</sup>

**3. We can create obstacles to faith (for those who might otherwise respond) when we refuse to change.** For example, some cling to the KJV when there are other translations far more accurate and far more readable, and thus present an almost insurmountable hindrance to understanding Scripture for the young postmodern person today. Others insist on singing only their favorite sacred music, denouncing contemporary music as unfit for human participation and at the same time refusing to acknowledge that their favorites were also once considered edgy.

Paul refused to be a stumbling block to *anyone*. In fact, in another passage (1 Cor. 9: 12) he said regarding his personal right to receive a salary for his ministry, “But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything (including poverty) rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.” Though he fought hard for the right of other ministers to receive a salary, he determined that in his own case it would be a detriment, so he refused. A little later in the same passage (19-22) he wrote,

*“Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law, so as to win those under the law. . . . To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.”*

Now having claimed that he avoids putting any obstacles in a person’s path that might hinder him from coming to faith in Christ, Paul makes another claim that demonstrates that he is not a crazy fanatic but a reasonable one.

**The reasonable fanatic commends himself in every way as a servant of God.** (6:4-10)

When Paul says he commends himself, I don’t believe he is bragging or setting himself forth in a prideful way as being a star performer. He is simply being honest, and at the same time he is actually demonstrating what ordinary servanthood ought to look like. John MacArthur writes, “A minister is not commended by his seminary degree, theology, popularity, personality, or success. His life is the only letter of commendation that matters, the only one that people will read.”<sup>iv</sup> So let’s take a look at the catalog of claims he makes. I have divided them into seven categories, though others do it differently. The first way in which Paul commends himself is . . .

**1. In regard to overall perseverance.** Paul was a servant of God who was committed to staying at his post no matter what. His faith never wavered; his hope never diminished; his joy never abated. Every individual who has served God for any length of time, vocationally or as a volunteer, knows there is always pressure to give in, give up, sell out, or compromise. For every one who perseveres there are a hundred shooting stars—some very bright, even brilliant for a while, but where are they five or ten years down the road?

I can't help but think of my brother when it comes to perseverance. When he graduated from seminary in 1968 he accepted the pastorate of a little church in Martensdale, Iowa. This morning he is preaching his last Sunday as pastor of that church—38 ½ years later! He's retiring from senior pastor duties so he can spend more time on the mission field. It hasn't always been easy; and he's been asked many times to consider larger ministries in more attractive places, but he has persevered.

**2. In regard to outside pressures:** “We commend ourselves (or we have proven ourselves) . . . in troubles, hardships and distresses.”

**Troubles** is a term that seems to suggest the normal irritations and difficulties of daily living in a fallen world, like relational stresses, financial struggles, family issues, dealing with cliques at school or with an ungrateful employer, transportation delays, you name it. None of us escapes untouched by these kinds of troubles.

**Hardships** refers to physical suffering. Perhaps he is speaking of personal health problems, of which Paul apparently had plenty. Some of God's choice servants have never seen a healthy day in their life, but they keep on serving anyway. And sometimes the hardship is not ours but that of a loved one for whom we are responsible to care. Ron Perkins is a hero to all of us who know him as he faithfully cares for Carolyn month in and month out, year in and year out. And there are others like him in our church family.

**Distresses** is a term that literally refers to “being confined in narrow places.” It carries with it a sense of confinement, a feeling of being trapped and suffocated by circumstances over which you have no control and from which you cannot escape. A middle-aged man who is laid off understands this concept, as does a Christian woman caught in a marriage to an unbeliever who is insensitive to her faith. I spent a couple of days this week in central Florida, visiting a dear friend from my church back in St. Louis who suffered a massive stroke. He is completely confined—a good mind trapped in a body that won't function; he has to have help with everything. That is a distress!

**3. In regard to persecution instigated by evil perpetrators**

**Beatings.** There may be someone here today who has suffered a beating for his faith, but it is unlikely, unless perhaps that person is from another country. Of all the people who have lived on the face of the earth since creation, we in America are probably the least likely to suffer physical persecution. But at least nine different times in the NT Paul indicates he was almost beaten to death. What we need to realize is that there *is* a persecuted church today, and we have brothers and sister in the faith who face this kind of treatment *regularly*.

Mona Charen, a brilliant conservative Jewish columnist (who unfortunately is not published in the Wichita paper), wrote a column challenging us Christians to speak up for our persecuted brothers and sisters:

*“Lai Man Peng was a 22-year-old Chinese Christian evangelist. At a meeting of one of China’s ‘house churches’, he and four other evangelists were seized by agents of the Public Security Bureau, China’s equivalent of the KGB.*

*In front of the congregation, Lai and the others were beaten severely. The security officers next handed the truncheons to the congregants and ordered them to beat the preachers, on pain of being beaten themselves. Lai was so badly injured that the security team feared he would die in their presence (leaving too much to explain), so they released him. He crawled and hobbled for several miles, attempting to reach his home, but finally collapsed and died.<sup>v</sup>*

The L.A. Times, certainly not known as sympathetic to Christian causes, nevertheless reported on November 15 about persecution in North Korea:

*A tattered Bible and a notebook containing a list of names were discovered wedged between two bricks in the basement of a house that was about to be demolished to make way for a road expansion. Five middle-aged men who were accused of running an illegal church were brought to an army compound. They were forced to lie on the ground and were crushed by a steamroller (when they refused to renounce their faith), said a 30-year-old North Korean defector, who added that he witnessed the incident while he was in the army.*

*“At the time I thought they got what they deserved,” said the defector, who related his story to The Times. Now a theology student in South Korea, he asked to be identified only by his English first name, Stephen.*

For most of church history persecution has actually been the norm, even for ordinary people of faith.

**Imprisonments.** The NT tells us Paul was imprisoned at least three times. And please understand that these were not the kind of country club prisons where Martha Steward did her time. These were dungeons—filthy, dark, cold, disease-ridden cesspools. And these experiences must have been especially difficult for Paul because he was an adventurer, a world-wide traveler, and an activist. For such a person to be confined, knowing that there were churches desperately waiting for him to visit, would have been as excruciating as the conditions themselves.

**Riots.** In almost every city Paul visited there was mob violence against him. In city after city he was literally driven out of town by hooligans and protestors. One example is found in Acts 17:4ff, where “the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city.”

**4. In regard to self-imposed hardships.** These were not things perpetrated on him; rather they were difficulties he voluntarily accepted.

**Hard work.** No one ever accused Paul of laziness. He worked all day as a tent-maker so he could spend his evenings teaching the Scriptures in private homes.

**Sleepless nights.** I suspect much of his lack of sleep was due to the hours he put in studying the Scriptures or writing letters to his churches or disciples. But some of it may be due to the fact that the conditions in which he lived often made it impossible to sleep—cold, wet ground, lurching boats, noisy city streets.

**Hunger.** There were times when Paul went without food because he couldn't afford it; at other times he went hungry because he was fasting for spiritual reasons.

Back in chapter 4 Paul refers to these three triads—troubles, hardships, distresses; beatings, imprisonments and riots; hard work, sleepless nights and hunger—as “light and momentary troubles (which) are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” Incredible, isn't it? What commitment!

Then in the first half of verse six Paul lists four spiritual qualities that were consistently evident in his life.

## 5. In regard to spiritual qualities

**Purity.** This refers to an undefiled heart, unmixed motives, a life without hypocrisy. It describes how Paul behaved when no one was looking. We sometimes think that morality is more degraded today than ever before in history, but human nature has not changed that much. When Jan and I visited the city of Ephesus in Turkey we marveled at the truly breath-taking ancient ruins there. One of the best preserved buildings is the library that stood there when Paul walked those streets. But in the corner of the library there was a room where only men were allowed, and out of that room there was a secret tunnel to the brothel across the street. A lot of men in Ephesus were going to the library but not to read books! Paul, however, rejected such behavior and kept his own life pure before God.

**Understanding** refers to a firm grasp on the truth. Paul had a biblical world-view that came from saturation with the Scriptures. He understood the sinfulness of mankind, the strategies of Satan, the evil of false religious systems, God's redeeming love, the plan of salvation. He said in 2 Cor. 11:6, “I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge.”

**Patience.** There are two Greek words translated “patience” in the NT. One refers to patience under difficult circumstances, while the other refers to patience with difficult people. The word here is the latter. Paul had many irregular people in his life, and even a number of downright antagonists, as we have seen in this book of 2 Corinthians. People can be harder to get along with than anybody, but God calls us to be patient with them.

**Kindness** is goodness in action. It means to be gentle, gracious, warm, accepting, courteous. Some of us are tempted at times to be sarcastic, cold, vengeful, or apathetic, but

Paul's credo was, "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

Now beginning in the middle of verse 6 Paul commends himself as a servant of God in regard to three sets of spiritual resources.

#### **6. In regard to spiritual resources.**

**The Holy Spirit and sincere love.** The Spirit is ultimately the source of all the spiritual qualities Paul has just mentioned. Though those qualities are evident, he does not take any credit for them. He knows good and well that they are the fruit of the Spirit—qualities that only God can produce in a person's life. The Holy Spirit has been given to indwell us and to be our helper, our comforter, our guide, our counselor; He is the one on whom we depend for direction in life and ministry; He is the one who keeps our focus on Jesus; and He empowers us for godly living.

Why is the Holy Spirit coupled with sincere love? Perhaps it is because only by the Holy Spirit can our love be sincere. Paul is talking about *agape* love, a love that seeks the best good of the other person no matter what we get in return. It is a love that is not sentimental and mushy but tough-minded and real. It is the love that sent Jesus to the Cross, sacrificial love.

**Truthful speech and the power of God.** Truthful speech is not just honest speech, but words that are grounded in God's revelation in the Scriptures. Paul faithfully preached that Word without wavering until the day of his death (2 Tim. 4:7, 8). But our speech, no matter how truthful and no matter how clever, is not effective by itself; it needs to be activated by the power of God. In 1 Cor. 1:18 Paul wrote, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Paul refused to water it down, redefine it, or massage it. He did not shrink from proclaiming its difficult demands or to avoid making sinners feel uncomfortable.

**Weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left.** We are in a spiritual battle, friends, and we have a supernatural enemy who opposes all we do and all we stand for. What weapons will we use in this battle? We have a choice, you know. We can use natural weapons—reason, debate, facts, knowledge, exclusively, or we can rely on supernatural weapons. In chapter 10:4 Paul says, "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds."

#### **7. In regard to profound contrasts in perspective.** He mentions nine such contrasts.

**Glory and dishonor.** Whether praised or blamed, loved or despised, flattered or criticized, it ultimately didn't matter to Paul; he was doing what God called him to do.

**Bad report and good report:** Some people slandered him; others told the truth; again it didn't matter. I don't think I could honestly say this. I care very much whether I am treated

fairly. I'm getting better at accepting responsibility when I do wrong, but I can hardly stand it when I'm accused of something I didn't do. But Paul takes the perspective that it ultimately doesn't make any difference when you know your life is pleasing to God.

Next there are two contrasts in perspective. The term "regarded" is used in verses 8 and 9, indicating that Paul is referring to how he is viewed from the human perspective, versus how God views him.

**Genuine, yet regarded as impostors.** Paul was accused of being a false apostle, while in fact he was the greatest of the apostles. Perhaps you have read recently that the President of Venezuela has decreed that New Tribes Mission leave his country. New Tribes is one of the finest mission organizations ever, and having been to the jungles of Venezuela with their missionaries, I can tell you that they have done nothing but good for the Indians there—medically, socially, economically, and, of course, spiritually. But Chavez accuses them of being CIA agents, impostors. The most genuine of Christians or Christian organizations will sometimes be regarded as phony.

**Known, yet regarded as unknown.** I can't help but think of the list of obscure names found in such passages as Romans 16, a chapter where Paul greets his many friends and co-workers in Christ. In their day they were nobodies compared to powerful businessmen and politicians, but their names have been preserved for posterity because God knew them.

Next there are five contrasts in reality, paradoxes if you will.

**Dying, and yet we live on.** For the believer death ushers us into a whole new experience of living. "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

**Beaten, and yet not killed.** Paul was beaten within an inch of his life many times, but he was immortal until his work on earth was done. The same is true of us.

**Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.** He was filled with sorrow for the unbelief of his fellow-countrymen, the Israelites, and for the lost in general. He was also sorrowful over disobedient, immature believers, and over the threats false teaching posed to the church. We today are filled with sorrow over racism, addiction, AIDS, religious bigotry, divorce, child abuse, political correctness, you name it. However, we can at the same time rejoice because a sovereign God is in control, and His plans and purposes are perfect.

**Poor, yet making many rich.** Paul's financial resources were minimal and at times non-existent, but his spiritual resources were limitless. And his Gospel message provided many with an eternal inheritance.

**Having nothing, and yet possessing everything.** Paul personally owned nothing, which was true of Jesus as well. No real estate, no home, no vehicles, no savings, nothing. Yet he knew that God had blessed him "in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ"

(Ephesians 1:3).

Friends, when we examine these contrasts, these paradoxes about the Christian life, we cannot help but admit that the Christian life is a life of fanaticism; but it is *reasonable* fanaticism. In conclusion let me illustrate the difference this way:

Crazy fanaticism is when a Muslim jihadist blows himself up, along with dozens of innocent people, expecting 72 virgins in the afterlife. Reasonable fanaticism is when a Chinese evangelist gives up what he cannot keep for the sake of that which he cannot lose.

Crazy fanaticism is when people stand on the street corner holding signs that “God Hates Faggots.” Reasonable fanaticism is when Christians express the love of God to those caught up in homosexual behavior and endure persecution (like Exodus Ministries) in order to help them escape that destructive lifestyle.

Crazy fanaticism, in my opinion, is killing abortion doctors and getting arrested for illegal protests. Reasonable fanaticism is building Pregnancy Crisis Centers and witnessing the love of Christ to women who are at the end of their rope.

Crazy fanaticism is King Herod killing all the little boys under two in Bethlehem. Reasonable fanaticism is the Magi, traveling great distances for months to find the one who is born King of the Jews.

Friends, let’s be fanatics for Jesus, but let’s be reasonable fanatics. Let’s pray.

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i. Ray Stedman, *Expository Studies in 2 Corinthians: Power Out of Weakness*, 120.

ii. Sometimes I think it is helpful to ask ourselves a simple question: “Will I have to live in peace for all eternity with people who believe such-and-such?” If so, maybe I should learn now to respect them and treat them as brothers and sisters here and now. By the way, the answer is sometimes “no.” For example, “Will I have to live in peace for all eternity with people who don’t believe in the deity of Christ or the authority of Scripture or the Virgin Birth?” No, I don’t think so. Those truths are taught so clearly in the Word of God that it seems to me that anyone who rejects them has defined himself outside the Christian faith. But “will I have to live with some who baptize infants, or believe in an old earth, or hold to a mid-trib rapture?” I definitely expect to.

iii. Doug Goins, “*Servants of God—Our Ministry of Reconciliation*,” *Discovery Papers*, No. 4644.

I am indebted to both Doug Goins and John MacArthur for insights into the meaning of these terms in verses 4-10.

iv. John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 2 Corinthians*, 226

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v. Mona Charen, "Christians Suffer Widespread Persecution for their Faith," Jewish World Review.com.