



way
of
life

Peter and Paul absorbed the reality of God that comes from our salvation in Jesus Christ. They worked to translate that reality to the world in a number of powerful sermons in the book of Acts. Through our series, **Way of Life**, we'll be looking at these powerful sermons and how they call us to action. Early Christians were known as "People of the Way," as though they were fighting for a new way of life. They were advocating for a way of life, but that way of life is Jesus Himself. Presenting Jesus as Savior and Lord competes with the alternative ways of life presented in culture. By digging into these sermons in Acts, we will see how the way of Jesus is better than any alternative offered by the world.

RELIGION WON'T DO IT • Acts 26:1-18 • Tim McConnell • October 9, 2016

"I will rescue you," says Jesus. We have studied the Way of Life found in Jesus presented by Peter and Paul in their sermons in Acts, and now this is the fifth sermon. We had two from Peter and three from Paul, and this is the fifth and final sermon in the series. I want us to focus in on the last few verses we read, 15-17: "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them.'" (Acts 26:15-17) I will rescue you. From what? From your own people and from the Gentiles. From your own past. From your pain and regret. I want to make the point this morning that Jesus actually rescues us from religion; that when Jesus said to Paul, "I will rescue you from your own people," he was talking about rescuing Paul from a system of religion that had ruined his life. Karl Barth famously said "Jesus Christ came to abolish religion." We think, "Wait. What? Jesus established one of the great world religions." But it depends what you mean by religion. By "religions" I mean any pattern of activity we use to try to impress God. Jesus rescues us from that. He rescues us from religion into relationship. That's the way of life.

My dad took my brothers and I on a once-in-a-lifetime kind of trip in July to celebrate his birthday: fly fishing in Alaska. And not just fly fishing, but heli-fishing. Each day we climbed into a helicopter and were flown to remote rivers to fish with our guides. It was awesome! One morning, I climbed into the little helicopter and sat right next to the pilot on a bench seat, and the pilot was fiddling with his seatbelt as he took off. He didn't get it quite right and mid-flight he turned to me and said, "Hold this," meaning the stick to fly the helicopter. Obediently, I grabbed it. But I said in my headset, "I'm not a helicopter pilot!" He said, "You are now!" My first thought was, "Yeah, I am now. I'm flying a helicopter." But then I had a second thought, "Wait a minute. No, I'm not! You're wrong! No amount of me holding this thing and hoping I don't kill us all is going to make me a helicopter pilot!" Later, he told me most of the control was happening in the pedals. But I'm reminded—you do what you are. You do what you do because you are what you are. And I'm no helicopter pilot!

Paul remembers being religious. "The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee." (Acts 26:4-5) Paul, back when he was called Saul, loved God and loved his religion and he wanted to please God and impress his leaders, and he did all he could to match every religious expectation. It was a religion. *I'm going to work hard, do my best, and impress God. Then God will bless me.* Paul wanted so badly to impress God. It was in his zeal to be religious that he did the things he regrets the most. Openly, although we can only imagine how painful it was to share, he recounts: "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem." (Acts 26:9-10) I had them thrown in prison. I tricked them into speaking blasphemy so I could convict them. I pull them out of their homes and even had some put to death. We forget, don't we that Paul was Saul, and still is? He is forever the same man who stood there and watched, and supervised, as the young Christian man named Stephen was stoned to death at his feet. Paul remembers that. That kind of religion, well, it's no way of life.

Then Saul got saved. Pastor Andy Stanley in Atlanta does a great job with this passage. He imagines the Trinity talking to one another. The Father says to Jesus, "Hey, look at that guy, Saul. Now that's a real go-getter. That's the kind of guy we need." So Jesus says, "Saul? You mean the terrorist? He's chasing our children all around Jerusalem." "Yeah," says the Father, "but look at all that energy! We need him on our team. Holy Spirit, can you get in on this?" "Sure. No problem. I'll just knock him of his horse, blind him for a few days, that should get his attention." Please don't take that as a window into the eternal and holy divine decrees of God! But I think it tells a story. Saul was not too far out of range for God's grace. All his gifts, misunderstood, misapplied...God could grab and turn around and use. It's not too late for you or for me either. God had to grab him and put a halt on all his religious behavior he was using to try to impress God, and rescue him, and set him free.

The sad thing is that even Christianity can be a religion like that. Some get the idea, and maybe you even have this idea, that meeting Jesus is just the entry point and then you have to impress God and earn your stripes. As though meeting Jesus is the open door opportunity, when you get your foot in the door, and you get a chance to meet the CEO or meet the General and you think, "I've got to make the most of this. I need to think of something great to say." Then you jam your foot right in your mouth. Is that what the Way of Life found in Jesus is about? A chance to impress God? Friends, hear me now: Jesus did not come to improve your religious behavior you were using to justify yourself or impress God, He came to rescue you from it. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, this is like nothing you've ever seen: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). It is a radical, complete transformation. New creation! Jesus didn't say, "I've come to help you finish your religious project," he said, "I've come to rescue you! Stop counting on your performance, your religious acts, your works, your holiness and start counting on me, count on my righteousness, not yours. Put your faith in me, and your righteousness (which, no matter how hard you try will never match holiness) your righteousness is irrelevant. By your faith in me, your life is hidden in my life, your soul is hidden in my righteousness." The righteousness of Christ is credited to you for your salvation. Stop being religious, and start a relationship with Jesus.

At this point you ask, "Well then, pastor, why am I here? In church. Why did I go out and serve the city yesterday and get these blisters and sore muscles?" Good question. Let me tell you why. There used to be a doctrine of salvation that said something like "Faith + Works = Salvation." But that's not right. That's not right at all. No. Jesus says, "I will rescue you." "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" says Ephesians 2:8-9. It's not that your relationship with Christ is an opportunity to impress God, it's that Christ has rescued you and saved you, not on the basis of your merits or deeds or performance, but by your faith and trust and belief in Jesus. That's all God wants. That's all God requires. And then you "have been saved," past perfect tense. It's all over. Salvation is not a question. But, you know what? You have not been

saved for nothing. You've been saved to be used. The next verse in Ephesians is verse 10: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Ephesians 2:10) So it's not "Faith + Works = Salvation" but "Faith = Salvation + Works." First you have to be, then you can do. See that? We do what we are. First the belief then the behavior. First the salvation then the sending out. First the transformation then the activation. You do what you are. Jesus said, "I will rescue you." Then He said, "I am sending you." Are you saved? Then you can be a vehicle for salvation.

Take the butterfly. The caterpillar becomes a butterfly. You do what you are. First believe then behave. The caterpillar is transformed. The old is gone, the new has come. Stop crawling around like a worm; stretch out your wings and take beautiful flight. Well, imagine for a minute a caterpillar wanting to live the life of a butterfly. It loves to see those butterflies in flight, and wants to do the same, but it is unwilling to go through the transformation, the death and resurrection of the cocoon. That's the frustration of someone wanting to do good in this world without God. I'm not saying it's impossible for a good deed to be done by any but a Christian, but there is a frustration there—because what is ultimately good? The Kingdom of God is built by faithful obedience. The Kingdom of God is where God is the King and we are his happy subjects. But how can you obey the voice of a king you've never met? Never knelt before? Of course non-Christians can do good deeds. It would be stupid to claim otherwise. But the eternal bricks of the Kingdom of God are laid one by one in the faithful obedience of those who love and serve the King, Jesus Christ. You must first be saved, then you can be a servant. You do what you are. First believe then behave.

But what about the other problem? Imagine this. Imagine the butterfly that wants to keep acting like the worm! Can you see it? What a strange animal, crawling around under the mildewed and rotten leaves, refusing to bat its wings even once, keeping all its beautiful colors smeared over with mud. Ugh! If you have been saved, it is in order to do the things a saved child of God does. Not religious performance, but religion as a life-giving pattern of habits and loves and devotions growing out of your ever-increasing desire to see the glory and fame of the name of Jesus lifted high! Not bound to act to

impress, but free to serve to glorify! That's the freedom of a Christian. That's the motivation to bring your soul to worship week by week and be transformed by the living and active Word of God. That's the impetus to take Saturday and wear the colors of your King as you go out and bless the city and all its needs. That, too is the motivation to take a commitment card home today, and sit down around the kitchen table, and open your Bible, and pray and ask the Lord, "What would you have me do with my money?" And come next week with a commitment to the Lord in that area that sits so close to our hearts—our finances—and joyfully lay down what you have to offer to the Lord for 2017. It isn't to impress God. It isn't to gain His love or pleasure. God loves you to the greatest measure of love! God loves you more than you could possibly imagine and more than I could possibly explain to you! God is pleased with you because you have hidden your life in Christ by faith, and the righteousness of His Son is over you like a cloak. There is no question of salvation, or love, or God's good pleasure. It's a matter of joyful obedience and trust that God's way of life is better.

Religion won't do it. If you are coming to the Lord, in any area of your life, and you are trying to add weight to one side of the scale, trying to put your offering on your side of the scale hoping that it moves God's side of the scale in your favor...stop it. Jesus says, "I will rescue you." (Acts 26:17) Jesus says, "I will save you." Jesus says, "I will pay for your sins, cover your mistakes and misdeeds, release you from the penalty of your errors." Jesus says, "In me, behold, new creation! The past is gone. That's gone. The new has come. Now take flight in the freedom and joy of eternal life. Let my colors fly. My banner over you is love. You are free."

© 2016 Timothy Parker McConnell

STUDY GUIDE

"Religion Won't Do It" • Acts 26:1-18

Start It

- When I became a Christian, a leader handed me the book "How To Be A Christian Without Being Religious" by Fritz Ridenour. I remember being a little confused. I thought I had just decided to be more religious, not less. But the book taught me that what I needed was a saving relationship with Christ, not a religious program of trying to please God. It was very helpful.

Study It

- Read Acts 26:1-18.
- Set the scene a little bit. Who is Festus? What is he trying to do with all this pomp and circumstance? How many ways do you see him attempting to impress King Agrippa?
- King Herod Agrippa II was the last of the line of Herodian kings. Jewish by birth but raised and educated in the Roman courts, Agrippa was more Roman than Jewish by this point. But he was appointed by Rome to rule Judea and the Jewish population there. Paul has already appealed to Caesar, the right of any Roman citizen under trial in an outlying territory. This is really an empty exercise as far as legalities are concerned. But Paul takes the opportunity to teach. Paul says he is under trial for his "hope in what God has promised our ancestors" (verse 6). What is he talking about?
- What motivated Paul's religious activity in his early life and career? Why was he opposed to the name of Jesus of Nazareth? What did he do to oppose the Jesus movement?
- In verses 12-18, Paul tells a very personal story in the public forum. What strikes you as important about this story? Why are personal stories and testimonies so important for Christians?

Pray It

Merciful God, You have won my heart by Your loving victories. You have come to me and reached me by grace. Not by my merits, but by the work of Jesus Christ, I am claimed as Your own. Help me to live now as a child of God, won by grace. In the freedom of your love and forgiveness I pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Live It

What are you doing to practice your religion? Examine your motivations this week, whether you are working to impress God or freely expressing joy and thanksgiving for His grace.