FRUIT LOOPS

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mprisoned in Rome a second time, soon to be beheaded for spreading his radical news about Jesus Christ, Paul remains others-centered. In his final New Testament letter, he preps his mentee, Timothy, on how to live, love and lead in “the last days.”

As pastor of the church Paul founded in Ephesus in today’s Turkey, Timothy faces an avalanche of religious opposition (Romans 3:21-26, p. 1018). Paul has been teaching what Jesus had personally revealed to him, i.e., that to be saved (born again), we must trust Jesus’ death and resurrection to fully pay the penalty for our sin, not relying on anything we do to earn God’s approval. This infuriates some Jewish believers who insist that to be right with God we must keep Moses’ laws as well as receive God’s free gift of grace.

Having been tapped by God to take the “salvation-by-faith-alone” gospel to the Gentiles, Paul could have become obsessed with his office. Yet he insists he’s the “chief among sinners.” Before he met the risen Christ, he had terrorized, jailed and executed Jesus’ first converts (Ephesians 3:1-10, p. 1062).

DISCUSS: In this politically-charged culture how do we muster the courage to tell our family and friends about God’s love and forgiveness?

* ***Cereal Killers***

Like a figure 8, a loop swerves until it crosses itself and lands back where it began. In our quest for *identity* (who we *are*), we settle for creating an *image* (who we want others to *think* we are). Solomon and Paul describe man’s self-directed, looping, tail-chasing, futile search (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11, p. 598; Acts 17:16-28, p. 1000).

The scramble to discover why God made us is like *Froot Loops*, the artificially sweetened, fruit-flavored cereal. These little munchies come in a splash of appetizing, appealing colors, **BUT** all taste the same, have little food value and can’t even spell their own name!

* ***Holey Bucket List!***

Our culture is polarizing. Rampant rage simmers just below the surface (2 Timothy 3:1-5, p. 1085).

Self-loving, greedy

Boastful

Insulting, contemptuous, slanderous

Disrespect for parents

Ungrateful

Irreligious

Unkind, merciless

Violent, fierce

Hating good

Treacherous

Reckless, disregarding consequences

Worshiping pleasure rather than God

Outwardly religious **BUT** inwardly rejecting God

DISCUSS: Do you find these misfires to be ramping up? In your experience give an example, and describe how you’re handling it?

* ***God’s Juicy Fruit***

Until we arrive in God’s presence, the Holy Spirit is the Restraining Force that’s preventing a lawless rebellion from vaporizing our planet. Instead of leaving us to go solo in this Godless culture, Jesus graciously sent His Holy Spirit so that we may live as victors “in Christ,” not victims. Let’s read Galatians 5:16-26, p. 1059.

Love – Someone you’ll meet today needs to know they are loved.

Joy – Many around us are dealing with despair.

Peace – It’s easy for circumstances to unsettle people.

Patience – Delayed gratification is a lost art.

Kindness – There’s plenty of harshness to go around.

Goodness – Whatever happened to wholesomeness?

Faithfulness – Which friend needs to know they can rely on you?

Humility – Deferring to others whispers, “It’s all about you, not me.”

Self-control – Muzzling your temper is evidence of the other fruit.

In what may be his finest hour, here’s Paul’s Churchillian farewell:

*“Control yourself in all circumstances; endure suffering, do the work of a preacher of the Good News, and perform your whole duty as a servant of God. As for me, the hour has come for me to be sacrificed, to leave this life. I have done my best in the race, I have run the full distance, and I have kept the faith. Now there is waiting for me the victory prize of being put right with God which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that Day – and not only to me,* ***BUT*** *to all who wait with love for Him to appear”* (2 Timothy 4:5-8)

Paul’s last words to his son-in-the-faith warn him of mounting pressure to water down the gospel of God’s grace. ***BUT***like Timothy, we need not fear to tell God’s love story because His Spirit in us gives us power, love and a sound mind to make Truth known.

DISCUSS: Can God’s Spirit in us impact our environment and how we react to it? If so, how?

If you’ve truly planted your faith in God’s gift of forgiveness, then you’re forever safe and secure, kept in the loop of His love, fired up and able to encourage others with Paul’s life-changing Good News that *“Everyone who calls out to the Lord for help will be saved”* (Romans 10:13, p. 1024)!

His Deal

January 16 & 30, 2019

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