

Sunday January 12th, 2025

Acts 9:1-25

Series: Lessons from the Early Church

Sermon: "Visit to Damascus"

There was a young man who felt called to enter the monastery and become a monk. After completing his training and taking his vows, the Abbot of the monastery appointed him to the scriptorium, where for centuries monks had diligently copied by hand the sacred biblical texts and the ancient rules of the order. The young man was excited about his appointment but became unsettled on his very first day. Upon arriving at the scriptorium, he immediately saw that the monks copied manuscripts not from the originals, but from older copies.

The young man took it upon himself to address the matter to the abbot, stating that coping from copies means that an error could have crept into the transcripts, and been replicated for centuries without anyone realizing. The abbot pondered this and realized that the young man was right. So, taking a newly finished copy of the scriptures, the abbot went alone, down into the lower catacombs to roll out an original and compare the two documents.

The abbot was gone several hours, and the other monks became worried, so they sent the new monk down to check on their beloved leader. Upon entering the vault where the ancient texts were kept, the young man found the abbot banging his head against the wall, repeating the same phrase repeatedly. "They forgot the 'R'. They forgot the 'R'." The young monk managed to calm the abbot down and queried as to why he was so upset.

The abbot explained that he had indeed discovered an error. That important letter had been left out from the original in subsequent copies; the letter 'R'. "Why is this so upsetting?" asked the new monk. "Because my son, the word they left the 'R' out of was 'celebrate'". This little story just goes to show that if you are determined to live by the letter of the law or rules, then you better be sure you have the correct version of the rules.

Don Posterski in his book *"Enemies with Smiling Faces"*, makes a very profound and important observation. For a person, a society, or a church to be a healthy, happy, vibrant place, there needs to be an equilibrium, a balance if you will, between conviction and compassion. Posterski writes, "Without compassion, we become harsh and judgmental. In society, conviction without compassion produces social policies that press too hard on problem people."

Thatcher economics or Harris economics are a good example. "Compassion without conviction, on the other hand, leads to systems that can reward deceit, and foster behavior that lacks honour. Left unchecked by each other, conviction and compassion become social and religious villains." Our stop on our tour through the early church today demonstrates the validity of a need for balance. For without this balance, the church diminishes its value to society and is marked more by fear than by love.

Today's passage marks one of the most critical moments in the church's story. We meet for the second time Saul. I say it a second time, because Saul was present when Stephen was martyred. Saul was a well-educated, well connected Jewish Pharisee. As he describes himself, "He was zealous for the faith of his fathers."

Saul is not content to sit on the sidelines while the “People of the Way” continued to preach and win converts. Again, I remind everyone that at this point the church is essentially all Jewish. Saul saw the new church of Jesus as an affront to his religion, and so he undertakes, with the blessing of his superiors, the persecution of Christ’s followers, in the city of Jerusalem. Saul and his minions terrorized the church with threats of jail and even executions not out of the question.

Saul was a man motivated fully by conviction. He firmly believed he was right, and the Christians were wrong. And if the Christians didn’t renounce Jesus, and return to the traditions of the Jewish faith, then they had to be eliminated. Now I need to tell you all about something important. Saul may have been feared by Christians, but he was a man greatly admired by his peers. The Jewish court, the Sanhedrin, saw him as their champion. To accomplish his goal of eradicating the Christians, Saul was given a great deal of latitude.

The Roman authorities actually turned a blind eye to Saul’s activities, because they saw it as an internal Jewish religious matter. To placate the Jews, the Romans often left the Jewish court to handle its own religious affairs. Jesus before Pilate was probably an exceptional case due to Jesus’ popularity, and the political undertones of his coming to Jerusalem. It wasn’t until there were Gentile converts coming to faith in large numbers that the Romans began to take notice and begin their own persecution.

Now the interesting thing, even ironic thing, is that Saul’s angry persecution of the church helped spread the Gospel. To avoid the terror of Saul and his supporters, Christians began to migrate away from Jerusalem, and new communities of believers began springing up in other locations. Saul’s persecution helped the church grow. News of this migration infuriated Saul, who desired even more so to eradicate the Christians.

So, he sought letters of permission from the Jewish court, directed to the synagogues in Damascus, to give Saul free reign to hunt down Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains. Remember Saul is a man of conviction, and he is sure he is doing God’s work in hunting down the Christians. So off Saul goes, and as he goes, we have this beautiful story of his conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Some people say he was knocked off his “high horse”, but the bible doesn’t say that. Saul likely traveled on foot.

Blinded by a bright light, Saul must be led by hand to Damascus, where we meet our second significant person, and one of those Christians Saul was trying to hunt down. Ananias was simply minding his business when Jesus comes and speaks to him. Jesus wants Ananias to go to the now blind Saul, and lay hands on him so he can see again. Ananias is frightened by this task. He has heard all about this man named Saul of Tarsus. Maybe Saul would arrest him or worse.

Then Jesus explains that Saul has been chosen to spread the good news of Christ to the Gentiles as well as the people of Israel. Even though he is terrified, Ananias is obedient and goes and prays over Saul and his blindness is healed. Saul’s conviction is now counterbalanced by compassion. The compassion of Christ extended through Ananias. There must be balance and if there isn’t, God may intervene as he did with Saul. The lessons from Acts nine for the church are plentiful, but here are a few key ones for us to ponder.

Although Saul was Jewish in his convictions, he has plenty of counterparts in other religions including Christendom. In all religions there are people who use their convictions as an excuse to harm others. This is certainly the case with groups like ISIS and Boko Haram who believe it is their mission in life to kill anyone who refuses to adopt their brand of Islam. In Christian circles we had events like the Inquisition, but even today, preachers and churches bully people into believing what they believe.

Whether by violence or trickery, coercion is just that, coercion. Blind faith, like that demonstrated by Saul that resorts to violence is never Christ's way. Christ is always about building bridges between people and developing abundant living. Anything else is a violation of his love. Saul also demonstrated that just because we think we are doing God's work, does not mean that we truly are.

Being sincere, and having conviction, doesn't make you right. Just as a person could be quite sincere and have conviction that they are a turnip doesn't make it right. It likely means there is something wrong with them. For the rest of us, there needs to be an ongoing testing of our methods and motives whenever we set out in the name of Christ. We can certainly pray and study scripture, but we can also test our convictions by dialogue with other believers.

One of the things that seems fairly clear, is that even with official sanction, Saul was a lone wolf. It is a beautiful thing that after his conversion, he undertakes his missionary work always with companions; like Barnabus, and Timothy.

Saul's experience also indicates that just because we seem to enjoy some success either in numerical growth, or even in miraculous events, does not mean Christ is behind it. Nor does being popular mean we are doing things right, after all Saul was very popular. People even honored him by laying their cloaks at his feet when the crowd stoned Stephen. Popularity does not equal truth.

Another lesson we learn from this passage is that sometimes God uses adversity to accomplish a greater goal. In Acts nine, the persecution of the early church brought great dividends to the church, because People of the Way were scattered away from Jerusalem into nearby cities. Sometimes it takes something very dramatic to get us to move somewhere or get onto some project.

Then there is the whole matter of asking whom do you serve. Saul was very zealous for the faith of his fathers, but he was still blind to the truth. In his ambition, Saul began to serve the institution, namely the Sanhedrin or Jewish Court, and not God. Our allegiance needs to be with God. Certainly, God calls us into his fellowship, and into the body of Christ, but we need to continually remind ourselves that the institution of the "Church" is not the same as the "body".

Sometimes, the institution gets in the way of the true purpose of our being together. Preserving history and tradition was what fueled Saul's rage. This misguided overvaluing of tradition was what ultimately lead to the Protestant reformation. The institution of the church had become so corrupt, that the message of the gospel was being lost.

Like Saul we might want to ask ourselves from time to time what exactly I am zealous for or about. Why are certain things of greater value to me than other things? Is my grip on habit and tradition a help or a hindrance?

And finally, the message I most want us to remember from Damascus, and what Ananias demonstrated is that sometimes God calls us to do something very courageous. God can call us to step way, way, out of our comfort zone. As with Ananias we may be called to go to the one person we would rather never see. We may be called on to speak up when we would rather stay silent. We may be called to forgo the one earthly thing that we believe gives us security and rely more fully on God.

As Ananias discovered, and most of the early Christians who followed, walking in Jesus' way is dangerous. Being Christ's disciples is risky, demanding our all. It may even, like Saul demand a relinquishing of everything we have ever known to embrace the new "Way". For Ananias and Saul, and countless other saints, the abundance of Christ's life in us comes down not to comfort, or security or material gain but to a matter of faith.

Chuck Swindoll in his book, *Living above the Level of Mediocrity*, tells the legend about a man who was lost in the desert, just dying for a drink of water. He happened to stumble upon an old shack-a ramshackled, windowless, roofless, weather-beaten old shack. He looked about this place and found a little shade from the scorching sun. As he glanced around, he saw a pump about fifteen feet away-an old, rusty water pump.

He stumbled over to it, grabbed the handle, and began to pump up and down, up and down. Nothing came out. Disappointed, he staggered back to the shaded spot. He then noticed off to the side an old jug. He looked at it, wiped away the dust, and read a message that said, "You have to prime the pump with all the water in this jug, my friend. P.P.: Be sure you fill up the jug again before you leave."

The man popped the cork out of the jug and sure enough, it was almost full of water! Suddenly, he was faced with a decision. If he drank the water, he could live. Ah, but if he poured all the water in the rusty pump, maybe it would yield fresh, cool water from deep inside the well, all the water he could want. The man thought about his options. What should he do, pour it into the old pump and take a chance on fresh, cool water or drink the contents of the jug and ignore the message.

Should he waste all the water on hopes of those flimsy instructions written, no telling how long ago? Reluctantly he poured all the water into the pump. Then he grabbed the handle and began to pump, squeak, squeak, squeak. Still nothing came out! Squeak, squeak, squeak. A little bit began to dribble out, then a small stream, and finally it gushed! To his relief fresh, cool water poured out of the rusty pump.

Eagerly, he filled the jug and drank from it. He filled it another time and once again drank its refreshing contents. Then he filled the jug and sealed it for the next traveler. Then he added these words to the note: "Believe me, it really works. You must give it all away before you can get anything back."

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The church has, and still is, being built by Christ through the lives of men and women who have given everything to gain back much. In closing I came across a little poem written by John R. Rice entitled *I Met the Master*.

*I had walked life's path with an easy tread,
I had followed where comfort and pleasure led;
And then by chance in a quiet place-
I met the Master face to face.*

*With station and rank and wealth for goal,
With thought for body but none for soul,
I had entered to win this life's mad race-
When I met my Master face to face.*

*I met Him and knew Him, and blushed to see
That His eye full of sorrow were fixed on me;
And I faltered, and fell at His feet that day
While my castles vanished and melted away.*

*Melted and vanished; and in their place
I saw naught else but my Master's face'
And I cried aloud: "Oh, make me meet
To follow the marks of Thy wounded feet."*

*My thought is now for the souls of men;
I have lost my life to find it again,
Ever since alone in that holy place
My Master and I stood face to face.*

-John Rice, Poems that Preach.

Have you met the Master? Perhaps it's time you did.