

THE MURDERER WHO BECOMES A MISSIONARY

November 5, 2023

Acts 9:1-31

FOCUS ATTENTION: Following Luke's accounts of the missionary adventures of Philip, Peter, and John, the author of Acts turns to the story of perhaps the most famous and significant of first century missionaries. His Hebrew name was Saul (Sha'ul) from the tribe of Benjamin, most likely named after the first king of Israel, who came from the same tribe. He would later be known by his Roman name, Paul, beginning in Acts 13:9. (Smith, T.C., *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Acts-1 Corinthians, p.58) Saul was a native of Tarsus, a city of Cilicia, and of pure Jewish descent. He was a Pharisee and a Roman citizen, placing him in the aristocracy among the Jewish people. It was the custom among the Jews that all boys should learn a trade, so Saul learned to be a tentmaker. As to his name change in Acts 13, some scholars believe that it reflected his new life in Christ. Others believe it related to his missionary journeys which took him deep into Gentile lands. On this point, the Bible is silent. However, Paul was still Saul and vice-versa, much as someone named John in English would be named Juan in Spanish.

NOTE: To be consistent with the ESV text in chapter 9, this lesson plan will refer to the apostle as Saul throughout.

Essence of the Text

Saul of Tarsus encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus, transforming him from persecutor of Christians to bold missionary for Christ.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

Acts 9:1-19: The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him.⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes

were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."¹¹ And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying,¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."

¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem.¹⁴ And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name."¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized;¹⁹ and taking food, he was strengthened.

Saul is first introduced to us immediately following the martyrdom of Stephen at the conclusion of Acts 7. In Acts 8:1-3 we read: And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

With this background, we pick up in chapter 9 where we learn Saul is still vigorously persecuting the disciples of Jesus (those belonging to "the Way"). For this pious, obsessed Pharisee, these Christians are not simply to be corrected, ignored, or put out of the synagogues. They are to be hunted down, imprisoned, and even killed.

v. 1 The picture is of an angry, violent man absolutely convinced of his own righteousness. Saul hated the disciples of the Lord. He wasn't seeking Jesus when Jesus sought him. We might say that Saul decided against Jesus when Jesus decided for Saul. Saul did his persecuting work under the direct approval of the high priest, Caiaphas. He asked and received letters from Caiaphas, authorizing his mission. (Guzik David, *The Enduring Word Commentary*: Acts, Ch. 9) The decrees of the high priest, or the

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Sanhedrin, were binding not only in the Jewish communities of Palestine, but also to a great extent to those beyond those borders.

Vv. 3-9 Saul's plans (and life) are turned upside down on the road to Damascus. He is caught in a heavenly light which knocked him to the ground, accompanied by the divine Voice of the Son of God. The Voice addressed Saul in his Aramaic tongue, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting Me?" Saul responded in shocked surprise, "Who are you, Lord (or sir)?" The Voice was authoritative and clear. This was the Voice of the risen and exalted Jesus, accusing Saul of persecuting not only the disciples, but Jesus Himself! It is important to note how the risen Savior identifies Himself with the Christian community. Saul was confronted by the true nature of his crime: He persecuted God, not man. Saul thought that he was serving God in viciously attacking Christians, but he discovered that he was fighting God. His awestruck companions heard the Voice but did not share Saul's vision.

Jesus shifts from self-identification and accusation to words of instruction. Saul was to continue his journey to Damascus where he was to await instructions. This is reminiscent of the apostles waiting in the upper room for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Saul rises to discover he is blind, requiring the help of his companions to continue the journey. Humbled and helpless, Saul obediently waits for three days, abstaining from food and drink. It is more likely that this fast was the result of shock and not a spiritual exercise. (Smith, T.C., *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. 10: Acts-1 Corinthians, p. 62)

Vv. 10-16 We know very little about Ananias of Damascus. From what we do know we can think of him as an average follower of Jesus, an ordinary man – not an apostle, a prophet, a pastor, an evangelist, an elder, or a deacon. Yet God used him because he was an ordinary man. If an apostle or a prominent person had ministered to Saul, people might say Saul received his gospel from a man instead of Jesus. He would later speak to this in Galatians 1:1 – "Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead." God spoke to Ananias in a completely different way than He spoke to Saul. Saul had a bold, almost violent confrontation from God, but Ananias heard the voice of God gently in a vision, where God called, and Ananias obediently responded. To say, "Here I am, Lord" is a perfect response to God. God gives Ananias detailed instruction as to where to go and who he is to meet, and what he is to do. Hearing the identity of the man, Ananias protests, his fear understandable. Saul's reputation as a belligerent persecutor of Christians was well known and well deserved. The Lord does not directly answer the disciple's misgivings, only repeating

the command to "go," which is all the reason Ananias needs to be obedient. Yet God graciously tells the man that Saul will be His chosen instrument to carry the gospel to "the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel," and that Saul will experience suffering in his new role. Thus, Ananias has nothing to fear. (Larkin, William J. Jr., *The IVP New Testament Commentary: Acts*, pp. 142-143)

Vv. 17-19a To be converted means to move from self-reliance to dependance on the Lord and interdependence with fellow believers. Saul the convert needs the help, support, and encouragement of the church. With the arrival of Ananias, we see the first instance where the formerly self-assured Saul humbly submits to the help and hands of the nervous disciple. The act of laying his hands and the words "Brother Saul" powerfully communicated the love of God. Blind Saul could not see the love on Ananias' face, so he communicated it through his touch and his voice. It seems that this is when Saul was actually born again. Here is where he received the Holy Spirit and was healed from his blindness, which was spiritual blindness as much as physical blindness. Ananias then baptized Saul, formally incorporating him into the body of Christ. Saul completes his physical recovery as he takes nourishment.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Paul's conversion experience was certainly dramatic. But are all instances of a person surrendering their life to Christ accompanied with extraordinary circumstances? (No.)
- What are the two basic requirements for a person to receive the gift of salvation, regardless of circumstances? (Repent and believe / place faith in the atoning work of Christ).
- If time permits, you might ask someone to share their testimony of coming to faith in Christ. It might be helpful to enlist someone in advance of class time.

Acts 9:19b-25: Saul Proclaims Jesus in the Synagogues

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.

²⁰ And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." ²¹ And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" ²² But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. ²³ When many days had passed, the Jews

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plotted to kill him,²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him,²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

If the Jewish leaders in Damascus expected Saul to continue his persecution of Christ-followers, they were certainly disappointed and shocked. Saul the Pharisee was no more. Saul the disciple of Jesus spent some time (about three years according to Galatians 1:13-18) with fellow believers, befriending those he had previously tried to imprison or kill. This shows the remarkable, radical nature of his transformation. Saul regarded his conversion experience as a pattern for all believers: Although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief . . . However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all long suffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe in Him for everlasting life -1 Timothy 1:13,16.

Saul's radical transformation brought about immediate action. Because he was a gifted student of the great Rabbi Gamaliel, he took advantage of the synagogue custom that invited any able Jewish man to speak from the Scriptures at synagogue meetings. There, Saul boldly preached that Jesus was the Son of God! The Jews were confounded and amazed by his preaching, leading some of the Jewish leaders to plot Saul's death and watching the city gates to prevent his escape. But Saul learned of the assassination plot. Avoiding the gates, Saul managed to leave Damascus with the help of the disciples who lowered him from the city wall. James Montgomery Boice stated, "It was the beginning of many escapes for Paul, and sometimes he didn't quite escape. Sometimes they caught him, imprisoned him, beat him. He did indeed have to suffer many things for Jesus' sake."

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Have you encountered someone whose life was so radically transformed by faith in Christ that people had a hard time believing it?
- What evidence did Saul demonstrate that his conversion was the real deal?

Acts 9:26-31: Saul in Jerusalem

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke

to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.²⁸ So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.²⁹ And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him.³⁰ And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

v. 26 The skepticism and fear of the Jerusalem disciples regarding Saul's conversion is somewhat surprising, considering that he had been a faithful follower of Jesus for three years at this point. But considering Saul's previous history and reputation, one might understand their reluctance to believe and trust him. At this point, some might be tempted to turn their back on Christianity. They might say, "I've been serving the Lord for three years, preaching Jesus Christ, enduring murder attempts and death threats. Now you won't accept me as a Christian? This is how you show the love of Jesus? Forget it!" But Saul had a greater heart of love for Jesus and Jesus' followers. It no doubt caused him pain, but he understood that the disciples in Jerusalem remembered the Christians Saul killed and persecuted. (Guzik, Ch. 9)

Vv. 27-28 Barnabas (whose name means "son of encouragement"), however, was made of sterner and kinder stuff. He accepted Saul as a brother in Christ, sharing Saul's history with the apostles from the moment of Saul's conversion experience to his ongoing preaching ministry and defense of the gospel. This time with the apostles in Jerusalem was important because it finally brought Saul into the family of the followers of Jesus. But Saul made a point of the limited nature of his time with the apostles in Jerusalem to show clearly that he did not receive his gospel from the other apostles. Though he was no doubt blessed and benefited from that time, he received his message by direct revelation from Jesus on the road to Damascus.

Vv. 29-30 Saul continued to contend for the faith. His preaching involved apologetics (an argument to defend a position) against the Hellenistic Jews, of which he was one. The chief opponent of Christianity was now its chief protagonist! As with Stephen, this group of Jews planned to do away with Saul. Learning of this plot, the Jerusalem disciples help Saul escape, taking him to Caesarea by the Sea and onto a ship bound for Tarsus. Both the persecution and divine preservation provide evidence of Saul's call. The instances of leaving an area to avoid death are not due to cowardice, rather they indicate a willingness to go wherever God led to spread the gospel. (Larkin, p. 147)

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V. 31 Here Luke summarizes the outward condition and inner health of the church. Despite persecution from the Jews, the gospel was spreading rapidly, the body of believers was growing exponentially, and these followers of Jesus were experiencing peace and power from the indwelling Holy Spirit. This is a pattern seen throughout the book of Acts, particularly through the ministry of Saul/Paul. We later read in Acts 16:5, as Paul, Silas, and Timothy journey throughout Syria and Cilicia as part of Paul's second missionary journey: So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

DISCUSSION PROMPT

- It can be challenging to accept someone who has come from a violent and/or anti-Christian past that now professes to follow Jesus. How are we as believers to respond in such cases?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

Saul's conversion reminds us that God finds some people who, by all appearance, are not looking for Him at all. Seeing how God reached Saul encourages us to believe that God can reach the people in our life that we think are very far from Him. We often give up on some people and think they will never come to Jesus; but the example of Saul shows God can reach anyone.

With that in mind, we should:

- Pray for lost people by name. Expect God to work.
- Love people who are far from Christ.
- Share the gospel. There are no hopeless causes.
- Encourage new believers, coming alongside to help them grow in their faith and find their place and purpose in the body of Christ.

Next week – Galatians 1:6-16

Galatians 1

FOCUS ATTENTION: If nothing else in 2023 has ‘stuck’ in your mind and heart, by now the phrase “One Book, One Story” should naturally roll from your tongue and echo in your heart when you think of the Bible! As we have moved from the gospel records and into the era of the First Century Church, the singular message [Jesus] of the Bible becomes even more pronounced. Further, we will encounter challenges to that message, from both within and outside the fledgling churches.

We have just completed three lessons in Acts that considered important events in the early church, and now we will devote three lessons to the writings of the Apostle Paul. As a key missionary figure in Acts and a writer of many New Testament books, Paul continues to exert influence on the theology and mission of the Church today.

Essence of the Text

There is only one Gospel sufficient for salvation, and it is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

When studying the New Testament, it is critical that we appreciate the relationship between the Gospels, the Book of Acts, and the Epistles (letters). The Gospels provide us with four unique perspectives of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God and Lord of the Church. In Acts, Luke gives us an historical overview of the spread of the Gospel across the first-century world as disciples are made and churches are planted. In the Epistles, we have words from Paul, Peter, John, etc., that instruct and warn the Church(es) and its leaders to remain faithful to the Gospel, despite internal and external challenges. The most prolific of the New Testament writers was a radical Jew who had persecuted Jesus-followers, but who repented and believed when confronted by Jesus Himself on the Damascus road. His Jewish name was Saul, but we know him by his Roman name, Paul.

Paul’s letters were written in response to either (a) questions posed to Paul by churches; or (b) to inform, educate, encourage, or correct the churches. The latter purpose applies to the Galatian Letter. New Testament scholars remain almost equally divided as to the timing and specific recipients of the Galatian letter from Paul, while all point to Acts 13-16 in support of their positions. For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that during Paul’s first two

missionary journeys, he aided Christian outposts across present-day Turkey (Galatia). While Paul was there (and afterwards), others [referred to as Judaizers] advocated that Jesus-followers should add Jewish practices to faith in Jesus. “Paul’s struggle with the Judaizers consumed much of the energy of the embattled apostle. Many of his letters reflect the struggle. But of all of Paul’s letters, Galatians reflects this struggle most clearly.” (Colson, Howard and Dean, Robert. *Galatians: Freedom Through Christ*. p. 3. Convention Press, Nashville, 1972). The Letter to the Galatians is a direct and powerful response of “NO!” to such a legalistic perversion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Judaizers. While this is not a formal term or identifier found in the New Testament, scholars have adopted this label to identify people who advocate adding Jewish practices [especially circumcision] to baptism as an outward sign of the inner faith of Christ-followers. While Jewish legalism seldom perverts the Gospel today, there are legalistic practices which creep into churches and challenge the sufficiency of salvation through faith alone in Jesus alone. Paul’s warnings apply today!

Galatians 1:1-5: Greetings in the Gospel

¹ Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—² and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Vv.1-2 The format of First Century written correspondence was very similar to memoranda [or even emails] we commonly use. The writer is identified; the addressee is identified; and a greeting is offered before the body of the message is presented.

- The Writer. Paul takes for himself the identifier of an “...apostle...through Jesus Christ...”. He wants there to be no question that what he writes is authoritative because of his personal calling from Jesus (see Acts 9) and not because of some appointment “...from men nor through man...”. Later Paul will identify himself as a former persecutor of the faith (1:13), but here he is a messenger of the One “...raised...from the dead.”, giving complete attribution for what he is saying to the Risen Christ.
- The Recipients. “To the churches of Galatia...”. In Acts we learn that Paul traveled through Galatia during both his first and second missionary journeys. A ‘watershed’

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moment in the early Church is recorded in Acts 15, when it is decided that with the exception of a moral code and a few dietary restrictions, Christian converts should not be subject to Jewish practices, and the new Christian communities will bring Jews and Gentiles together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ without Jewish pre-conditions. Paul does not reference this Jerusalem Council in Galatians, but his letter does uphold this break with Judaic legalism in favor of a Gospel of freedom from sin and burdensome rules.

Vv.3-5 Paul's greeting in these verses is consistent with the greetings found in most of his other letters, except for verse 4. There, Paul stresses the atoning sacrifice of Jesus "...to deliver us from the present evil age...". Initially Paul had focused on his authority as an apostle to validate his message, but here he moves to the Work of Christ "...to deliver..." or "to take out for oneself, to rescue" [Vine, W.E. Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words. p. 157. Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1996] as the validation for this message of grace and peace that frees the believer, fulfills God's will, and brings glory to the Deliverer.

"For Paul, right relationship to God came through faith in Jesus Christ, His Son, who died for our sins and was raised from the dead, not through tribal identification or legal conformity." (MacGorman, J. Wm., Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. 11, p. 77. Broadman Press, Nashville, 1972)

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Some unbelievers characterize the Christian life as needlessly structured by commands and prohibitions. How does Paul's greeting of deliverance in Christ counter such arguments?
- The entire letter of Galatians will address how the liberation from sin that believers enjoy in Christ brings freedom to life and changes our behaviors from "have to" into "want to". Discuss how easy it is to fall into the trap of "have to do" in futile efforts to earn or prove salvation.
- Invite the class to overview this concept of Christian liberty by describing some behaviors or practices that they "want to do" rather than feel they "have to do" as a result of following Jesus.

Galatians 1:6-12: Only One Gospel

⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel

of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. ¹⁰ For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. ¹¹ For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. ¹² For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ

Vv. 6-7 Paul jumps immediately into the very heart of the concern that he has for the Galatian believers. Paul is "...astonished...", finding it both incredible and unbelievable (Vine) that they "...are turning to a different gospel...". His incredulity is based on the rapid pace of their change, and the fact that they are "...deserting..." or turning away from Jesus and His abounding grace. It is possible that in his mind, Paul is comparing his own post-conversion steadfastness in the Gospel with the reported sudden, way-ward leanings of the Galatians, and he finds it baffling, discouraging, and disturbing. How could anyone turn to a 'different' gospel?

Regardless, Paul is quick to say there is "...not...another one..." [Gospel], yet there is word that "some...trouble you and...distort to gospel of Christ." For the Apostle, there is only one gospel, and anything taken away from or added to the Good News of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is simply unacceptable as gospel [good news]. "...to make salvation depend on anything but the sheer grace of God in Christ is to replace the Gospel by a religion which is a perversion of the Gospel." (Allan, John A. Galatians-The Torch Bible Commentaries. SCM Press LTD., London, 1951).

Vv. 8-10 Earlier (1:1) Paul asserted that any authority that came from man or through man was not authority at all; only Christ is sovereign [he will repeat this assertion in letters to Corinth, Ephesus, and Colossae]. It appears the 'troublers' in Galatia where insinuating or outright claiming that their legalistic version of 'gospel' came with heavenly, angelic authority. As we frequently saw in our Old Testament reading and study, angels [heavenly messengers from God] were key components of Hebrew and Jewish religious thought, used by YHWH to correct or even bring judgment. Paul counters this argument of authority by twice pronouncing curses (condemnation on the speaker and the message, see Vines) on such a fallacy and its promoters.

Ironically, Paul will use an argument style common in Jewish rabbinical instruction in verse 10 to advocate against the

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teaching of these 'troublers'. Paul will use questions to contend that the true Gospel [salvation alone through faith alone in Jesus alone] will never please man nor gain man's approval. Only speaking that which is approved of God and pleases God brings the salvation of God to the servant of God.

Vv. 11-12 Paul will now close the loop on the authority of the Gospel that he has shared with the Galatians, but first he will appeal to their sense of community. He has already contended that the Gospel he preached came from Christ-given authority, yet he shared it with them not out of superiority but comradery; they are his "...brothers...". This vocabulary lets Paul closely identify with his readers, sharing in the adoption of a new life, a new hope, and a new family. The Judaizers may have seen the Galatians as inferiors who needed special practices to be acceptable in God's family. Not so with Paul.

In summary, Paul says the Gospel he knows came to him by "...revelation of Jesus...". Not even the Judaizers can appeal to a higher authority than the Son of God, Jesus!

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Say, people often reject the Gospel because they see it as a constricting set of rules which restrict life and liberty. Ask class members to identify some of those "add-ons" that are errantly added to the Good News of salvation alone through faith alone in Jesus alone. Discuss how to avoid such perversions of the Gospel.
- A frequent [though illogical] complaint lodged against Christians is that we 'act like we are better than everyone else.' How does Paul's humble identification with the Galatians as "brothers" counter such an accusation? Discuss.

Galatians 1:13-24: Called by the Gospel

¹³ For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵ But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. ¹⁸ Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's

brother. ²⁰ (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) ²¹ Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²² And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. ²³ They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." ²⁴ And they glorified God because of me.

Vv. 13-17 Paul offers this abbreviated autobiography to show the singular sufficiency of the Gospel of Jesus in changing a man, his behavior, and his direction. A more detailed account of this dramatic change in Paul's life begins at Acts 7:58 [Saul holding the coats of those stoning an outspoken Christ-follower named Stephen] through the end of the Book of Acts [Paul preaching the Gospel in Rome]. Paul wanted to articulate that despite his past, who he had become and what he was doing was now found in the goodness and graciousness of the Sovereign God.

Paul's Life Before Jesus:

- "...I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it." Paul was not being prideful about his former life; he was being honest. He admitted his sin against God, God's Son, and God's church.
- "...extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers...". Paul confesses that he once shared a Judaizer-like trust in tradition and ritual which was honored by men but in complete opposition to God's Son Jesus.

How Paul Came to Jesus:

- "But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace..." Paul acknowledges that God's gracious plan all along was for holiness and mercy to be showered upon Paul. God desires this for all.
- "...was pleased to reveal his Son to me..." God's pleasure [revelation to Paul] was not initially pleasurable [blindness and fasting] for Paul (Acts 9:3-9). However, the clear revelation of the Truth of the Gospel found in God's Son would open Paul's eyes and heart to a new message and a new purpose for his life.

Paul's Life Since Jesus:

- "...in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles...". Paul's plan had been to persecute and destroy the Church; God's plan was that Paul would preach Jesus to those that Judaism sought to exclude from God's mercies.

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"And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, 'He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.' And they glorified God because of me." Paul's entire life was changed by repenting and believing the Gospel. His Jewish pedigree and practices he would characterize as trash (Phil. 3:4-10). Meeting Jesus and following Jesus changed Paul forever. The change in Paul would be acknowledged, not by praising Paul, but by glorifying the power of God to radically change a radical persecutor into a radical preacher!

There is only one Gospel that can change a man like Paul was changed. There is only one Gospel that can change the direction of any life from the roadway of sin to the pathway of salvation. There is only one Gospel that can bring hope and peace and purpose to the life of anyone who will repent and believe. There is only one Gospel, and His Name is Jesus!

DISCUSSION PROMPT

- Paul has used a simple formula [my life before Jesus; how I came to Jesus; my life since Jesus] to share his faith story with the Galatians. Share your own faith story in this way or invite 1-2 class members to use this formula to share their faith story. Encourage class members to use such a model in sharing their faith in Jesus with others.
- Why is it important to glorify God when He changes the life of a repentant believer? How can we glorify God when such a change occurs in our lives or in others?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

- "The Galatian letter played a key role in the most important issue facing Christian believers in the first century. If the Judaizers had won instead of Paul, the history of Christianity would have been very different." (Colson & Dean, p. 3).
- When anything is added to or taken away from God's gracious provision of salvation alone through faith alone in Jesus alone, it becomes legalism or license, and is no longer "Gospel".
- Challenge class members to repent and believe the Gospel.

Next Week - Romans 15:5-21

Romans 15:5-21

FOCUS ATTENTION: Last week we focused on the Book of Galatians, where Paul challenges those who would add to or take away from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Today we consider a portion of the closing chapters of the Book of Romans. Some Bible students have considered Romans to be an extended version of Galatians, for in both letters Paul contrasts the hobbling strictures of the Law with the freedom and right standing before God provided in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Unlike other Pauline epistles, which were written following travels through regions or cities [Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Phillippi, Thessalonika], Paul writes Romans in anticipation of a future visit [Romans 16:22-24] prefaced by a return to Jerusalem with a love gift from Grecian Christians to the struggling Church in Jerusalem. The Book of Acts tells us that Paul's hope to visit Rome did come to pass, though ironically it was for his trial before Caesar's court and in the company of a Roman guard (Acts 28:11ff). Once again, we see how our Sovereign God uses life events to mold His people and facilitate the spread of the Gospel to the nations.

Essence of the Text

Jesus' followers are to tell the Good News of Jesus until the whole world hears.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

Romans 1-11 exposes the folly for Jew and Gentile in trying to obey the law to escape sin and to gain (earn, purchase, or secure) right standing before God. Romans 12-16 details the marks (attitudes, practices, behaviors) of those who have received right standing before God through repenting and believing in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In Romans 15, Paul exhorts the Roman Christians to exercise their holy calling in Christ to make Jesus known through both routine and intentional means.

Romans 15:5-7: The Glorious Example for the Nations

⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Vv. 5-7 With the exceptions of Athens, Pisidian Antioch, and possibly Jerusalem, there was no more diverse and cosmopolitan first-century city than Rome. Inherent in such a melting pot would be both blessing and challenge; the blessing being the opportunity to encounter various peoples through the Gospel and the challenge being remaining faithful to the Gospel in such a diverse setting! To this point Paul has repeatedly stressed that the Gospel (and not the Law) can bring redemption to the nations. In these few verses, Paul encourages the Roman believers to exemplify unusual unity and harmony in the face of their ethnic, social, and cultural diversity.

Only by remaining in the "...endurance and encouragement..." of God can the church provide the world a model of "...live[ing] in such harmony with one another." Endurance (hupomone) carries the idea of "patience, abiding under or persisting", while encouragement (paraklesous) holds that "another can/ will stand alongside and comfort" (Robertson, A.T. Word Pictures of the New Testament, Vol. IV. Broadman Press, Nashville, 1931). Since the believers' endurance and encouragement are "...in accord with Christ Jesus..." (i.e., the direct result of His persistence and comfort to believers), the result is that the church will experience and the world will hear "...one voice...", glorifying and exalting the Father and the Son. Paul is saying that our treatment of one another [in the church] should be a winsome example and testimony within the church and to those outside the church.

Further, Paul contends that the unifying bond of Christ's Presence in/among the church provides a spirit of hospitality and togetherness that "...keeps receiving one another as Christ received us" [translation mine]. The church should be the most welcoming setting in every culture because Christ, for His glory, has welcomed and received us [the church].

Ours is a day when the Church seems more known for its fractures, failures, and disagreements than its unity and singular song of God's love. Paul commended the endurance of the Roman believers because of their love for and treatment of one another (even with social and cultural diversity) "...glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...". Like our spiritual ancestors in Rome, may we be known for how we bless and love one another, all for the glory of Christ!

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- How can a church be both welcoming to a diverse culture and consistent in its beliefs and practices?

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- Paul said the Church in Rome was known for its endurance, its encouragement, and its unity. What are some evidence of these traits that you see in FBC-P?
- How could your class be more welcoming to people who do not look, act, talk, think, or behave like you do? Discuss.

Romans 15:8-13: The Glorious Hope for the Nations

⁸ For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." ¹⁰ And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." ¹¹ And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him." ¹² And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope." ¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Vv. 8-9a Paul is firm here that in fulfillment of God's covenantal promises, Jesus Christ came to serve [and save] "...the circumcised...", the Jewish people. One recurring fallacy in Judaic thought was that Messiah would serve only as Israel's covenant king and save Israel alone. Paul says that there is no doubt that Christ [Messiah] fulfills God's truthful promise to and through the patriarchs. Only in Jesus could "...the circumcised..." and "...the Gentiles..." come together in one body [the Church] to "...glorify God for his mercy."

Augustine famously described the relationship between the Old and New Testaments this way: "The new is in the old concealed; the old is in the new revealed." Paul goes on to use four Old Testament quotes to demonstrate that Christ [Messiah] is the Glorious Hope for Jew and Gentile alike, indicating that this Hope is to be shared until all have heard.

Vv. 9b-13 The explanation of Paul's use of the Old Testament verses to follow is summarized from The Holman New Testament Commentary, Vol. 6, by Kenneth Boa and William Kruidenier. Paul was extremely adept at understanding the New Covenant found in Jesus by looking at the previous covenants of the Covenant-keeping God.

- "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles [nations], and sing to your name," (2 Samuel 22:50). This song of praise by King David is also included in Psalm 18, and is typical of the Old Testament

perspective on "gospelizing" the nations of the world (the Gentiles). As a result of God's favor to Israel..., Israel would praise God among the Gentiles, and they would hear of His power and might.

- "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." (Deuteronomy 32:43). The entire verse in this Song of Moses foretells that the Gentiles [nations] will meet God either at the fellowship table [rejoice] or the bar of justice [vengeance]. All are invited to come willingly in peace before being forced to come submissively in subjection.
- "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the people extol him." (Psalm 117:1). This verse is an inclusive call to the nations to praise the God of Israel for "his love toward us" and "the faithfulness of the Lord."
- "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope." (Isaiah 11:10). Isaiah 11 predicts a branch rising from the "stump of Jesse" [the father of King David] which would rule over the nations [plural], bringing hope even to the Gentiles.

In all four references, Paul uses Old Testament testimony to underwrite the sufficiency and universality of Christ as the fulfilled Hope for all nations. Paul used these verses to demonstrate that the Gentiles were not an afterthought in God's plan but were always destined to inherit salvation through Israel and her Messiah, Who we know to be Jesus the Christ.

v. 13 In other letters of Paul, he sometimes appeared to break out into spontaneous song when moved by the enormity of a Spirit-inspired truth. Such is the case in 15:13, where Paul will pronounce a praise-benediction resulting from the great Hope in Jesus. This Hope brings "...joy and peace..." to those who believe, all through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

DISCUSSION PROMPT

- Select one or more of: the Creation Covenant (Gen. 1-2); the Noahic Covenant (Gen. 6:18; 9:9-11); Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3); the Mosaic Covenant (Ex. 19-24); the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:12-16); or the New [Jeremiah] Covenant (Jer. 31:29-34). Use Paul's same technique from Romans 15:9b-12 in finding New Testament fulfillment of Old Testament promises. Discuss God's faithfulness as fulfilled in Jesus.

Romans 15:14-21: The Glorious Calling to the Nations

¹⁴ I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge

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and able to instruct one another.¹⁵ But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God.¹⁸ For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience--by word and deed,¹⁹ by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God--so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ;²⁰ and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation,²¹ but as it is written, "Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand."

Vv. 14-16 While Paul could only speculate on the Roman church from reports he had received from others, he moves to detail the Glorious Calling to evangelize the nations that he shares with the Roman church [and likewise, all New Testament churches of all the ages]. Paul has determined that because of their "...goodness...and knowledge..." the Roman fellowship is well-equipped "...to instruct one another." Paul is comfortable with this church's qualifications in mutual accountability and missional execution. Since their maturity enables them to demonstrate goodness and knowledge towards one another, they are also able to demonstrate [share] the goodness of God's grace in Christ and aid others in understanding how one must repent and believe the Gospel. Paul has deemed the Roman church as ready to go to the nations.

To that end, he submits that he [Paul] has written "...boldly...", through "...grace..." as a "...minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles...". With such an assertion, Paul is not abandoning his native kinsmen (the Jewish nation) but is now welcoming all nations, tribes, languages and tongues to come to the "...gospel of God...", which offers salvation faith through Jesus and sets the believer apart for service "...by the Holy Spirit."

v. 17-19 We know that Paul came from a very proud faith tradition and practice. In Philippians 3:3-8, Paul extolled his Jewish pedigree while saying he now counted it as "rubbish" when compared with knowing Jesus. While Paul once had the potential of being an exalted Jewish leader, here he will

willingly declares that "In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God." The actual Greek construction here denotes that Paul boasts in Christ alone, and not his own accomplishments. A possible (better?) translation is, "I therefore have the boasting in Christ Jesus, the things that have to do with God." [translation mine].

Further, in verses 18-19, Paul says it is the "...power of the Spirit of God..." which energized him in the spread of the Gospel from the seat of Judaism ("...Jerusalem...") to the limits of the Roman world ("...Illyricum..."). Paul will accept no credit for the spread of the Gospel; it is only by the power of God [note how he used the word twice in these verses].

Likewise, while God elects to use us today to spread the Gospel to dark places, we must always glorify God [and not ourselves] for the lives changed as the darkness of sin is conquered. We can rejoice that Jesus has chosen to use disciples to make other disciples!

v. 20-21 Paul closes his discourse on the Glorious Calling by reminding himself, the Roman church, and us, that the work of bringing the Gospel to the nations is not finished. Paul challenges himself with a bold goal: "I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named." Going forward, Paul will dedicate himself to finding those places where the Good News has not been proclaimed, and there he will stake a claim for the souls of men to turn to heaven's King!

Paul is confident in this goal, because he knows the Old Testament! He quotes Isaiah 52:15, claiming the prophetic promise that "Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand." Like Paul, we must not be discouraged that dark places without the Gospel exist; we must make it our goal, our aim, our sent mission to fulfill our calling by bringing the hope of Jesus to the whole world.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Lead the class to identify and discuss marks or characteristics that FBC-P shares with the Church at Rome in being spiritually qualified to be a missional fellowship. Also consider opportunities for greater growth in the Gospel enterprise.
- How might the "Power of the Spirit of God" energize 21st Century Christ-followers in the Glorious Calling of taking the Gospel to the nations?

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SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

- Christ followers are to be missional examples to one another.
- Christ followers are to proclaim the glorious hope of the Gospel to their world.
- Christ followers are to extend the glorious work of Gospel proclamation to places and people who have yet to hear of Jesus.

Next Week - 1 Timothy 3

1 Timothy 3:1-16

FOCUS ATTENTION: Recent years have brought a significant discussion to the forefront of Southern Baptist life concerning the New Testament church, its offices, and its community under the Lordship of Christ. Frequent questions are: Who can be a Pastor of a local church? Who is 'in charge' in the local church? Does a local church have 'offices' or 'officers' or both? How is the mission of the local church executed? How are decisions made in the local church?

A few weeks ago, we studied Acts 2, where the church was birthed by the commission of the risen Christ; in the power of the Holy Spirit; and, upon the foundation of the Gospel. Thousands repented of sin, believed in Jesus, and were baptized into the church fellowship [ecclesia]. We considered that the church is tasked with learning, caring, fellowship, and worship. (Larkin, William J., *The IVP New Testament Commentary: Acts*, p. 61)

As the church grew and spread the Gospel message, the new church plants needed guidance in orthodoxy (what churches believe) and their polity (how churches do what they do). Paul's Pastoral Epistles provided that guidance. Still today, it is appropriate that we look to the New Testament for our examples of effective leadership and fellowship within the church that Jesus constituted.

Essence of the Text

Under the Lordship of Christ, the Household of God [the Church] is to be humbly led and faithfully served by godly men of character, whose example is Jesus.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

Today we consider the instruction of the Apostle Paul to a young pastor, Timothy, concerning what churches believe and what churches do. 1 Timothy, along with 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon are commonly labeled the Pastoral Epistles, because in them Paul instructs selected church leaders and churches concerning their accountability under Christ, before their earthly leaders, and toward one another.

1 Timothy 3:1-7: Leading the Household of God

¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable,

hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

The first scriptural office that Paul identifies for the church is the office of Pastor. He addresses the nature of the office itself (v. 1) and then describes the traits that make one eligible to hold the office (vv. 2-7). In the New Testament, there are three unique words [poimein, or pastor; presbyteros, or elder; and episkopos, or bishop] that are almost interchangeable in identifying the leader that Jesus provides for the local church. Here Paul uses only one of those words.

v. 1 Episkopos (overseer or bishop) is the word that Paul uses twice in 1 Tim. 3:1-2, noting a role which in ancient thought included administrative, organizational, educational, and disciplinary functions (Robertson, A. T. *Word Pictures of the New Testament*, Vol. IV. Broadman, Nashville, 1931). Paul endorses the humble hope (to aspire) of being named to this office as longing for "...a noble task." The word noble carries the idea of a good, wholesome work which edifies [builds up] both the worker and those touched by the work.

Vv. 2-7 Paul does not spend time telling Timothy what the bishop-overseer is to do, but he gives extended attention to what the bishop-overseer is to be. Skill sets can be caught through modeling or taught through dedication to the subject matter; but Paul will explore the character traits that will enable the man of God to nobly fulfill his calling in guarding, leading, and feeding the church of Jesus Christ. Who must an overseer or bishop be?

- A man who is "...above reproach...". This is a man who is noted, both within the church and the community, as a person of good reputation. His walk matches his talk, and his behavior mirrors that of the man described in Psalm 1:1-3.
- A man who is "...the husband of one wife...". Most agree this means the overseer must hold marriage in high regard; however, Bible students then divide over the varied societal and cultural nuances of the last two thousand years. Five views persist: (1) one wife for one life; (2) one wife at a time; (3) married only once [no re-marriage after a divorce or spouse's death]; (4) never

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divorced; (5) necessarily married. Regardless, Paul insists on faithfulness in the marriage bond. (Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. 11, p. 317. Broadman Press, Nashville, 1971).

- A man who is "...sober-minded, self-controlled, hospitable ...". These three character traits supplement and strengthen one another. The sober-minded man is neither dour nor silly while he exhibits consistent responses to the varieties of life. He is neither erratic nor reactionary; he is both prudent and predictable. He is welcoming to others and welcomed by them; he finds joy in relationships and expands his circle of contacts at every opportunity.
- A man who is "...able to teach...". We Baptists place great attention on and worth in the pulpiteering skills of our bishop-overseers! We are prone to brag on our preachers when we might do well to brag upon the thing preached! Paul describes a person who by example and exhortation applies Gospel truth to his life and the life of others.
- A man who is "...not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money." Paul turns to four prohibited character traits which would disqualify a man as a bishop-overseer. Unsurprisingly, they are all linked, as drunken excess often leads to uncontrolled behavior and speech, requiring more and more resources to feed the excess or repair the damage. These excesses have no place in the life of a bishop-overseer.
- A man who "...must manage his own household well...". Paul is not placing an undue burden upon the household or family of the bishop; even the pastor's household sometimes has dirty laundry and disobedient children! Verses 4-5 are focused on attitudes of openness, acceptance, and love which should be evident in the bishop's home and in the Lord's church. The bishop is to manage relationships and behaviors in the church for the glory of Christ and the benefit of all.
- Paul adds one more prohibition. A bishop "...must not be a recent convert..." because of the risks involved in spiritual immaturity and the deceit of conceit. Leaders always benefit from the 'seasoning' that time and experience bring, especially in handling holy things (like God's Word and God's people).
- Finally, Paul says the bishop "...must be well thought of by outsiders...". The church sees who he is when he leads in worship, or comforts, or corrects, all within the fellowship of the church. The man seen by the

non-church community presents (either favorably or unfavorably) a reflection of the personhood and character of Christ. His Lord and his church are tinted with the reputation the bishop holds within the local community.

These are exceedingly high character expectations! This higher calling from Jesus, confirmed by the local church, deserves our gratitude, our 'fellowship', and our prayerful intercession. This noble task, the under-shepherd to the Good Shepherd's sheep, is both an undeserved privilege and unbearable burden. Only in service to the Savior, empowered by the Spirit and called forth by a Holy God, can a man walk the road of sanctification demanded of pastor/elder, bishop/overseer. We should thank God daily for these men and their families!

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Pause your class discussion and pray, by name, for the Pastors our God has brought to serve Him and lead us at FBCP. Pray for their families; thank God for their character and gifts. Pray for the protection of the Holy Spirit upon their lives, their families, their work, and their calling.
- Why do you think Paul wrote of what bishops-overseers are to be as opposed to what they are to do? Discuss.
- As they serve us in Jesus' name, how can we aid our Pastors in continued growth as the men Jesus wants them to be? Identify at least two ways your class can support one or more of our Pastors as they grow in Christ and serve Him by leading us.

Timothy 3:8-13: Serving the Household of God

⁸ Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.

⁹ They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. ¹¹ Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

¹² Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.

¹³ For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

As with his instruction on the character traits of bishop-overseer, Paul continues this line of thought when considering the second church office, the deacon. Coming to English as the transliteration of the root word diakonos,

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a deacon is one who waits/serves at tables. The result has been that many link the feeding ministry task of Acts 6 as the origin of the office of deacon. However, those seven are never identified as diakonoi (deacons) and at least two of them [Stephen and Phillip] are known for their preaching and evangelism rather than their service to the fellowship of the church (Acts 7-8). For the church, Deacons do sometimes attend to the physical needs of the fellowship, but their primary role, based on their spiritual character, is to aid the pastors in addressing the spiritual condition of the congregation.

v. 8 Paul's word to Timothy (and us) about deacons begins by addressing both character and behavior. Then as now, character is revealed in behavior. Paul says deacons "...must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain." Dignity is not haughtiness or aloofness; it is a humble confidence in God birthed in the testing [see verse 10] of everyday life. Paul then turns to three prohibitions like those he identified concerning bishops. Double-tongued is not just spreading falsehood; it is telling people what they want to hear with no regard for the truth. It also contains the idea of allowing or participating in verbal destruction (gossip) rather than squelching it. Deacons, like bishops, are to flee addictions and greed (3:3). Paul is not promoting abstinence or poverty; it is a reminder that deacons [and for that matter, all believers] must not be controlled or consumed by fleeting pleasures or possessions. (Smethurst, Matt. Deacons: How They Serve and Strengthen the Church. p. 63ff. Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2021).

Vv. 9-12 Moving from three negative requirements, Paul turns to three positive ones which will be readily apparent in the life of a deacon.

- "They must hold the mystery of the faith...". This is not some secret handshake or fraternal sign offered behind locked doors. When Paul speaks of the 'mystery' of the faith, he is noting that once the full height, breadth, depth, and width of God's grace miracle (Jesus) was hidden, but it has now been revealed. The deacon is to know the faith; he is to be held by the faith; and he must live by the faith as revealed in Jesus.
- "They must... also be tested first...prove(n) blameless". Conviction, practice, and a guiltless spirit are precursors to the office of deacon. It has been said that one should only be a deacon once they have already been "deaconing"! A deacon should be vetted by character, competence, and current service to the body of Christ.

- They must... [be] managing their children and their own households well. Here Paul inserts some deacon qualifications that are linked to the life-practices of spouses and children, for the service ministry of a deacon is often a shared ministry within the household. The positive traits of a household do not necessarily qualify a deacon, but negative traits can disqualify. In short, the deacon's fitness for service is tied to the deacon's leadership and influence in his own house.

v. 13 Paul closes his instruction on the church offices with a commendation for those who "serve by serving:" "...deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus." Care must be exercised in understanding this verse; "...gain..." invokes the idea of something granted, gifted, or laid by for another rather than something earned (Robertson, A.T. Word Pictures of the New Testament, Vol. IV, p. 575. Broadman Press, Nashville, 1931). Further, what is 'laid by' for the deacon is standing in the Kingdom and perseverance [confidence] by and in Jesus Christ.

1 Timothy 3:14-16: Being The Household of God

¹⁴ I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵ if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. ¹⁶ Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

Vv. 14-16 I grew up as a fifth-row, piano-side Georgia Baptist; that was where we sat. All of us. Together. Every Sunday (morning and evening). Every Wednesday. If the church doors were open and no one was sick, Dad, Mom, and 'their boys' would be there. For my five-foot, one-inch-tall Mother, only one thing equaled the importance of presence: knowing how "...to behave in the household of God." We all learned early on that 'church behaving' required greater concentration than rowdy boys could often muster (and yes, there were consequences). Paul acknowledges that he hopes to return to Timothy and the Ephesian church, but until that point (and for that matter, going forward), Paul wanted the church to understand who they were to be whether they were worshipping together or scattering to serve. Paul had offered instruction on the traits of bishop and deacon households, and he now turns to how the church, the Household of God, was to "behave."

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- Paul first speaks of the church as being "...the household of God...". This is the third time in this passage that Paul references family relationships to understand the way churches are led, served, and function (3:4-5; 12; 15). Home should be where we find safety and acceptance. Home should be where we may fail but still be loved. Home should be where we are encouraged in our hurt and disciplined in our error. The same must hold true in the church.

The church must be "...the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth." Pillars and buttresses are construction features that support large buildings. Paul sees the church as providing the supporting truth that our God is a "...living God...". Pillars and buttresses may be decorative, but their function is to point to and support the beauty of the walls and ceiling. Being the church means we point to another: Jesus, the Lord of the Church!

To be the church, we must hold to a singular confession: "...the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory." Godliness is found in the revealed mystery of mercy and grace we see in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, the Lord of the Church. All the church is and all the church does must edify, magnify, and exalt Jesus!

We are who we are as church leaders, church servants, and church members because of the supremacy of Christ and His Lordship over our lives. This is a church!

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- How can the church effectively be "the household of God" as we reach out to a hurting world around us?
- What steps can we take to be assured that we are standing tall (like pillars) for the truth of the Gospel?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

- The character of church leaders and servants is more important than what they do or do not do.
- Jesus' vision for His Church includes leaders, servants, and family-like support for all the members.
- How can YOU best lead or serve or grow in the household of God?

Next Week - 1 Peter 1:3-12