

Disciples Series: #13: Paul – The Disciple Untimely Born
1 Corinthians 15:3-11 (NRSV)
By John Gill

Last Sunday we completed our look at the twelve disciples Jesus chose to follow him. It has been wonderful to get better-acquainted with the dozen men Jesus knew in the flesh – who gave their lives for the cause of the Kingdom – those we now refer to as “saints.”

But as we were going through the series I began to feel that the series was somehow incomplete – that there was one more sermon I needed to preach before we set this sermons series aside – one more “saint” we need to honor. How can we study the disciples of Jesus without at least mentioning Paul?

It is true that Paul was not one of the Twelve Disciples. And we have no reason to believe that he ever saw Jesus in person, or ever heard him preach. But this man was considered to be just as much an Apostle of Christ as any of the others who HAD known Christ in the flesh. In fact, it can be argued that, except for Jesus himself, no person has been more important to the history of the Church – than this man, Paul.

You see, it was Paul who launched “Christianity” as a world religion. If it hadn’t been for Paul, the Christian movement might well have always remained a minor sect of the Jewish religion, and probably would have eventually fizzled out.

But Paul, almost single-handedly, opened the door of the Gospel to the Gentiles who lived all across the Roman Empire. Thanks to Paul, the Christian faith spread like wildfire – and the rest is history. So, this morning, we need to pay tribute to the person who many consider to be the greatest Christian ever to live – Saint Paul.

Who was Paul? Many of you have studied the life of Paul throughout the years. Paul is a major figure in our Bible. But, in case you’ve forgotten, let me refresh your memory a little bit:

Paul, whose given Hebrew name was “Saul” (“Paul” is the Greek version of the name), was born in the city of Tarsus to devoutly religious Jewish parents. Now, Tarsus was a bustling city – one of the hubs of culture and commerce in the Roman world. In fact, because Saul was born in this Roman city, he was automatically a citizen of Rome, giving him a lot of social status. Tarsus was also the location of one of the greatest universities of the ancient world.

Thanks to Saul’s brilliance and the opportunities for learning available to him, Saul received the finest education that the Jewish community AND the secular university could offer. He was highly educated – certainly the best-educated of all the Apostles of the Early Church.

Saul was a “cosmopolitan” man. He was fluent in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic (the common language spoken by Jesus). He also was probably fluent in Latin.

Yet, despite his secular education and his status as a Roman citizen, Saul was also a very religious Jew. He became a member of the most strict group within Judaism – the “Pharisees” (the ones, you might remember, who were so eager to discredit Jesus).

Yes, Saul was a remarkable man – a man of considerable gifts and talents. But he was also a man who had a “dark side.”

As a religious Jew, he believed that those who followed “The Way” of Jesus were blasphemers – and that they must be stopped. Saul made it his personal crusade to wipe-out the fledgling Christian movement before it got out of hand.

In Jerusalem, he went after the followers of Jesus with a vengeance. He even was party to the stoning of Stephen, a follower of Jesus who became the first martyr of the Christian Church.

As a result of the persecution in Jerusalem, some of the followers of Jesus had fled to the city of Damascus. But Saul would not be deterred. He went to the ruling council of the Jews in Jerusalem – the Sanhedrin, and received the authority to travel to Damascus to continue to persecute the followers of Jesus there.

With that as his mission, Saul set out on his journey – a journey that would change his life, and the history of the world, forever! As you may recall, God had a different mission in store for Saul. You see, God had a plan for his Church – a plan that would call for a leader who could take the Gospel message – not only to the Jews, but to the non-Jewish world, as well. God needed a leader with unique qualifications – and Saul was the man God wanted for the job!

On the road to Damascus, Christ appeared to Saul in a flash of blinding light and spoke to him so powerfully that it threw Saul from his horse. And when Saul got up off the ground, he was completely blind.

What a remarkable turn of events! This pompous, arrogant, impassioned man ready to storm into Damascus to wipe out the Church – instead has to be led by the hand, bewildered and frightened.

And then, God sat back for three days and let Saul stew. You see, God gave Saul a “time-out,” plenty of time to think before he sent a believer named Ananias to him. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Ananias laid hands on Saul. And as he did, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes. His sight was restored – but that wasn’t the real miracle! The real miracle was the spiritual transformation God had worked in Saul’s heart. God gave Saul new sight – and new insight!

He was immediately baptized, and began to preach in the synagogues of Damascus that Jesus is the Son of God – much to the astonishment of all the Christians he had come to arrest!

Thanks to the blinding light on the Damascus Road, Saul saw the world in a completely different way. “Saul,” the chief persecutor of the Church – had suddenly become “St. Paul,” it’s chief proponent! He had been “blind,” but now – for the very first time in his life – he could truly “see.”

You know, a person can be “blind” in many ways. Now, I’m not suggesting that Paul did not experience physical blindness. But I DO think that his physical condition can be seen as symbolic of a deeper, more profound “blindness” that prevented Paul from seeing life clearly. You see, Paul was “blind” long before he ever set foot on the Damascus Road – he was blinded to the truth of Christ.

We know all about that kind of blindness, don’t we? There are many things that cause us spiritual blindness in our day-and-age, just as in the days of Paul. There are many things that blind us to the truth of Christ, and cause us to do things that “persecute” Christ every day. Let me mention just a few this morning:

First of all, often times, our own self-righteousness can bring on spiritual blindness.

This was the cause of Paul’s spiritual blindness. His religious zeal had gotten misdirected into hate. Paul had believed that he was right – that HE had a monopoly on the truth, and that anyone who believed differently must – not only be wrong – but must be stopped!

You know, self-righteous hatred caused by religious zeal is just as prevalent in our day as it was in the first century. All you have to do is pick up a newspaper, switch on your TV, or look on Facebook, and you can see the horrible results of self-righteous hatred at work: Terrorists, (both domestic and foreign) killing the innocent in the name of “God,” Christians and Muslims killing each other in places like Nigeria and the Sudan, Muslims and Hindus murdering each other in India, Jews and Muslims at each other’s throats in Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, violence motivated by prejudice and vigilantism the streets of America, and hatred and vitriol in our political discourse as we elect a president.

This kind of self-righteous hateful attitude was expressed in a song that was made popular on the American frontier. It had a verse that went like this: “And if you will not join us, we bid you now farewell; For we are bound for heaven, and you are bound for hell.”¹

Yes, Paul was blinded by self-righteous hatred. And, to some degree, so are we.

Second, we can be blinded spiritually by following false-teachings.

In Second Peter (the second chapter), we hear this warning (see if it doesn’t sound like today): “False prophets appeared in the past among the people and, in the same way false teachers will

appear among you. They will bring in destructive, untrue doctrines, and deny the Master who redeemed them, and so bring upon themselves sudden destruction. Even so, many will follow their immoral ways; and, because of what they do, people will speak evil of the Way of truth. In their greed, these false teachers will make a profit out of telling you made-up stories. For a long time now, their Judge has been ready, and their Destroyer has been wide awake!" (2 Pet. 2:1-3 GNB)

Obviously, if you are following the teachings of a "false prophet," you will be "blinded" to the truth of Christ. Sometimes these false teachers take the form of "religious cults" that pervert the Word of God for their own purpose – often with disastrous results. The tragedies of Jonestown, Waco, and the Heaven's Gate cults are examples of what happens when people blindly follow false prophets.

But there are other kinds of false teachings out there trying to get you to follow them. The New Age movement, spiritualism, secular humanism, and political cults like Q-anon are just a few of the many formidable false teachings vying for our loyalty. And sadly, there are EVEN some leaders within the church, both on the right and the left, who preach things that are contrary to the teachings of the Gospel. All of these are just as much spiritual-dead-ends as are the religious cults. Yet, they are much more subtle, because we can buy into them without even knowing it. Yes, multitudes of people today are "blinded" by all kinds of false-teachings.

But perhaps the most prevalent cause of spiritual blindness today is self-centeredness.

When "self" becomes first in our lives, then we are as good as dead, spiritually speaking. When we worship at the idols of materialism, greed, self-serving political doctrines, pleasure-seeking, and sinful vices, then we CAN'T be worshiping at the throne of God.

That was the hard lesson learned by the rich young man who came to Jesus to become a disciple. And Jesus told him that he must give all his possessions away – to give up his selfishness – before he could become a disciple of Jesus. And you remember that the young man went away sorrowful. That young man allowed self-centeredness to "blind" him to the truth of Christ.

Yes, spiritual blindness has many causes – but only one cure. When we turn our lives around and surrender to God's will for our lives, then the "scales of blindness" we have been wearing will fall from our eyes. And we, like Paul, will begin to "see" the world in a whole new way!

Maybe that is what we are referring to every time we sing that great old hymn, written by a former slave-trader – turned preacher and poet, John Newton, when he wrote of the power of God's grace to transform – even the most reprobate of lives: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, Was blind, but now I see."

Like St. Paul, Newton had his opened and was amazed by God's grace that had redeemed even his troubled life. He wrote the epitaph etched on his own tombstone, which reads,

“John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and Libertine, as servant of slavers in Africa,
was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,
preserved, restored, pardoned,
and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy.”

Grace did not free him to server NO master – but serve a NEW Master!

In a way, Paul also wrote HIS own epitaph in the 15th chapter of First Corinthians: “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.”

Both Paul and John Newton experienced the power of God's “amazing grace.” They once were blind. But God opened their eyes – so that they might truly SEE.

And the Good News is that God can do the same thing – for you! Friend, are you groping your way through life, blinded to the Christ who loves you? Let God take the scales from your eyes, so that you can see the Truth of Christ, and experience His Amazing Grace for yourself.

¹ www.devotions.net/devotions//files/2002/02feb/23.htm