

April 21, 2024

The Acts of the Apostles
XII. A Changed Man?
Acts 9:19b-31

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Last week we witnessed Paul stopped by Jesus on the road to Damascus.¹ Stopped from his intention of harassing the fledging church in Damascus. But Jesus didn't just stop Paul – he saved Paul, as we say in the Bible Belt. Our passage last week ended with Paul confessing faith in the risen Christ and being baptized. In other words, again, Paul got saved.

But this morning our passage raises a question about Paul and his salvation. The church, having been so brutally persecuted by Paul, simply wants to know whether or not Paul has also been changed. Forget saved – is he now different? In other words, they want to know whether or not he really has been altered by his encounter with Jesus. The question comes first in Damascus, where Paul begins proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues, testifying that Jesus is the Son of God. The Jewish members of those synagogues don't know what to make of this, but apparently Paul's preaching convinces the Christians there. Because when the Jews subsequently try to kill Paul – after all, to them he had become a traitor to the faith – when they try to kill Paul, members of the church in Damascus help Paul to escape.

Paul then heads to Jerusalem, where he faces an even tougher round of questioning. Our text says he came to Jerusalem and attempted to join with the disciples – and they flat out refused him. Turned him away because they simply did not believe he was now a disciple – they simply didn't believe he could have been changed that completely, that quickly. But Paul finds an ally in Barnabas. Barnabas spends enough time with Paul to become convinced that the change in Paul is real. And with Barnabas' support, Paul eventually wins over the disciples in Jerusalem. So much so, that when Paul is threatened with death by the Jews of Jerusalem on account of his preaching of Jesus, the disciples there help him escape. One small note in our text signifies the disciples' new attitude towards Paul's changed heart – the text says that it was his “brothers” in the church who helped him escape. Brothers – meaning that Paul's conversion and change was now fully believed and that he was now fully welcomed into the church's fellowship.

So, to sum up, Paul was converted, or “saved,” on the road to Damascus. But what we learn this morning is that not only had he been saved, but also that he had been changed by his encounter with Christ. And in those two effects of Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus – saved, but also changed – we find the full description of what it truly means for us also to be disciples of Jesus.

The grace of Jesus Christ breaking into our lives does two things in us – it saves us, meaning restores us to right relationship with God through the forgiving mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ; but it also begins the long, actually lifelong, process of changing us – the grace of Jesus Christ then turning us into the sort of person He always intended for us to become. Paul on the road to Damascus is Paul getting saved – justification is the theological word for it, being forgiven and receiving Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Paul preaching Jesus in the synagogues of Damascus and Jerusalem, at great danger to himself no less, is Paul showing signs of having been truly transformed by his encounter with Jesus – and sanctification is the theological word for that, for being changed and continually being changed over the course of one’s life more and more into the likeness of Jesus. And true salvation, true discipleship means both of these movements through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ happening in us. We are saved by His grace, and then we are changed by His grace. Or, as Paul himself will later put it in his second letter to the Corinthian church: “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away* [justification, getting saved]; *behold, the new has come*” [sanctification, getting changed into the image of Christ from that moment forward].²

Justification – Paul on the road to Damascus, getting stopped by the grace of God in the midst of his wrongful life, being forgiven by the grace of God for his wrongful life, and by the grace of Jesus accepting Jesus as His Savior and being baptized. Eugene Peterson has this great justification parable about trying to work on his lawnmower one day. He had the mower tipped over on its side so he could remove the blade and sharpen it. But he couldn’t budge the nut on the bolt holding the blade in place. He got out the biggest wrench he had – didn’t work. He got a four-foot length of pipe and slipped it over the wrench for more leverage – didn’t work. Then he picked up a large rock and began just pounding away on that pipe – didn’t work. At which point, he confesses, he was beginning to get somewhat emotionally involved with his lawnmower. Hearing the sound of this loud emotional involvement, his neighbor walked over, examined the situation, and then said he had once owned a mower just like that one. And, if he remembered correctly, the threads on the bolt went the other way. Peterson reversed the direction of his exertions and, sure enough, it worked.³ Justification, Peterson then says, is just like that. By the intervention of Jesus Christ, realizing we are on the wrong path, turning our lives in the right direction – and then finding in Jesus Christ that we are forgiven, set on the right path and turned in the right direction.

But then sanctification – Paul learning to live as a changed man, as a disciple of Christ instead of as an enemy of Christ. Paul learning how to live out his newfound relationship of righteousness with Christ – in other words, not just set on the right path, but also beginning the journey down that right path. Not just being turned in the right direction, but also learning to chart and pilot his life in that new and right direction. Now on the whole, I think, we much prefer justification over sanctification when it comes to thinking about and describing our salvation in Jesus. Perhaps because justification stories are always so much more dramatic than sanctification stories. Very few sanctification stories start out, “Well, there I was, hung over and in prison, the wife had left me, the kids wouldn’t speak to me, and even the dog was ashamed to be seen with me.” Sanctification stories are more like, “Well, the other day I was driving in traffic and this car cut me off. But instead of cursing at him like I usually would, I found myself praying for him to get home safely. And I think that is a sign Jesus is working in my life to make me a better person.” Great story – but not particularly dramatic. Even Paul’s justification story is more exciting than

his sanctification story: “Well, there I was on the road to Damascus, ready to arrest me some Christians, when all of a sudden . . .;” as compared to, “Well, after I had finished preaching, I got word that some of the Jews were quite upset with me . . .”

But perhaps the deeper reason we prefer justification to sanctification is because justification, “getting saved,” feels liberating and joyful; while the lifelong process of sanctification, “being changed,” can be hard and it can be painful and it can ask of us things we are not yet ready or willing to do. C. S. Lewis has a wonderful analogy for sanctification, this being changed part of salvation, which gets at this:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

. . . If we let Him – for we can prevent Him, if we choose – He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into . . . dazzling, radiant, immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a small scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful: but that is what we are in for. Nothing less.⁴

Sanctification, being changed by God’s grace, is not always easy, not always welcome, not always pleasant for us to go through.

But still it is the operation of that same grace in us which has first saved us – and therefore must be understood by us as every bit as important and necessary and even to be desired as is God’s grace as justification. For without God’s grace changing us, our lives will not come to bear the fruits of the Spirit He desires to see in us, which are the evidence of mature discipleship in us – the same fruits of the Spirit that we, at least in our better moments, long to see in ourselves: love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.⁵

So, at the very least, in response to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ saving us, we can and must respond to that grace by at least asking, seeking, desiring that grace also to change us. Like St. Augustine’s prayer, from which I suspect C. S. Lewis drew his inspiration:

*My soul is like a house, small for you to enter [Lord], but I pray you to enlarge it. It is in ruins, but I ask you to remake it. It contains much that you will not be pleased to see: this I know and do not hide. But who is to rid it of these things? There is no one but you . . .*⁶

Salvation is not just to be forgiven, but to be changed. And so we pray for God to change us, we pray for His grace to help our lives work the way He designed them to work. We grow in our desire to become the person He desires us to become. And we try our best, daily, to open our lives to the workings of His grace, that we might indeed be changed into persons whose daily lives are marked by love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Well, I said sanctification stories aren't usually that exciting – but here are two sanctification stories. Well, one description of how sanctification can work in our lives; and then one real-life story of someone deeply sanctified by Christ. The description comes from the theologian Debra Rienstra, in her book entitled, So Much More – that very title an invitation not to settle for justification without sanctification. She writes this:

*Sin has momentum, but so does salvation. One grace-filled step leads to another. A couple begins to pray together and study the Bible with others, and they soon find themselves taking a delight in their marriage they have never felt before. A man quits drinking and replaces that habit with churchgoing and prayer, and he soon finds himself relishing life again, enjoying his work and showing faithful care to his family. Older people inspire younger people to faithfulness and service; friends encourage friends in acts of kindness; parents teach self-control and gentleness to their children; and communities form and grow and endure down the generations until the fruits are so abundant that they leave little space for weeds.*⁷

And now the story – a story about the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, who was the Archbishop of Chicago from 1982 until his death in 1996. If you have never read his little book, The Gift of Peace, I recommend it to you very highly. It contains the gracious reflections of a mature and Christ-like soul. The first half of the book tells the story of how Cardinal Bernardin dealt with a false accusation of sexual abuse that almost destroyed his life and ministry. In November of 1993, a young man dying of AIDS publicly accused Cardinal Bernardin of abusing him years before. The media descended upon Cardinal Bernardin like vultures. The accusation was, in time, proven to be completely false, but not before considerable damage had been done to his reputation and to his spirit.

But Cardinal Bernardin, from the very start, refused to nurture any anger or resentment or hatred toward this young man. He absolutely refused to return evil for evil. And after he was exonerated, Cardinal Bernardin very quietly set up a meeting with his former accuser. He wanted to forgive him and be reconciled to him in person. The story of their meeting is too incredible for words – the kindly old Cardinal overwhelmed this young man with his compassion and wisdom.

And by the end of their meeting, the young man had been transformed. Such that when he died a short while later, he died reconciled to his family, reconciled to his church, and reconciled to his God – all due to the kindness he had received from the man he had nearly ruined.

So how does one become as sanctified and Christ-like as Cardinal Bernardin? This is what the Cardinal himself wrote:

God speaks very gently to us when he invites us to make room for him in our lives. The tension that arises comes not from him but from me as I struggle to find out how to offer him fuller hospitality and then to do it wholeheartedly. The Lord is clear about what he wants, but it is really difficult to let go of myself and my work and trust him completely . . .

To close the gap between what I am and what God wants of me, I must empty myself and let Jesus come in and take over . . .

It is unsettling to pray to be emptied of self; it seems a challenge almost beyond our reach as humans. But if we try, I have learned, God does most of the work. I must simply let myself go in love and trust of the Lord.⁸

Not just saved, but changed. Not just justified, but also sanctified. Not just born again, but growing up into a new creation in the grace of Jesus Christ.

¹ Acts 9:1-19a.

² II Corinthians 5:17.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1980), pp. 33-34.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 174-175.

⁵ Galatians 5:22-23.

⁶ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans., R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 24.

⁷ Debra Rienstra, *So Much More: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), p. 81.

⁸ Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997), pp. 15-17.