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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
July 5, 2015
6th Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 19:15-26; Matthew 7:24-29

Hymns: 279; 342; 777; 50:2 (242:1-3)

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Acts 9:1-19

Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

3 As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. 4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?"

Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

6 So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?"

Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

7 And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. 8 Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10 Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias."

And he said, "Here I am, Lord."

11 So the Lord said to him, “Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. 12 And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight.”

13 Then Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in 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 vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.

16 For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.”

17 And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” 18 Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.

19 So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.

(NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: A Sense of Dedication.

When we see dedication in a person we are often struck by it, and admire that dedication. A dedicated person can accomplish a lot more than a person who is only modestly motivated, or even worse rather apathetic. Sometimes we see dedication in people’s work ethic. Some people give themselves whole-heartedly to their work, while others drift along, doing only what is necessary to get by. Who doesn’t want the dedicated worker on his team?

However there are times when dedication or zeal can be turned against us, indeed it can and often is turned against the Lord. We see great fervor in the Muslim extremists who are striving to

control the world and make all the world one Muslim state or Caliphate. That kind of dedication scares us, but it is not limited to the Muslim extremists. It can be seen in evidence in other false religions and also in causes promoting the lusts and desires of man's sinful ways, mischaracterized as liberty when it is in fact a cruel slavery to sin that ends in destruction.

Dedication nearing that of a zealot was evident in this man named Saul who is featured in our text this morning. Without doubt he was dangerously misguided in his zeal for God, but that did not make the situation beyond hope. In our text we see how –

THEME: The Spirit Transforms a Dedicated Man.

This individual presented to us in our text was Saul of Tarsus, but he is much better known to us as the Apostle Paul. It is good for us to remember this fact as we go through life almost writing off some people as “unsaveable.” You would be hard pressed to find an individual who was as --

I. Dedicated in Opposing the Christ.

Acts 19:1-2 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Up to this time Saul had been wreaking havoc among the Christians in Jerusalem. He had been entering their homes and arresting them on charges of blasphemy. He was testifying against them before the Sanhedrin, and that council was sentencing people to death by stoning. Saul was thoroughly convinced that in all this he was serving the God of Israel. In his misguided zeal Saul was ready to go to great lengths to stamp out this sect that some referred to as the Way, and some of the detractors in outlying areas were beginning to call Christians. Saul was willing to do all within his power, or the power of the High Priest, to bring this movement to a swift close. That is why he got the papers from the High Priest. Rome had granted the High Priest authority over Jews living in many different cities in the region, and Saul was ready and even

eager to travel all the way to Damascus to track down and capture these followers of this corrupt sect that worshiped this dead rabbi named Jesus. There was no doubt about Saul's dedication to the cause!

When one sees dedication like that from an individual who doesn't comprehend the gospel, doesn't it make you wonder? And we do see this in people who are caught up in false religions today. Regrettably, we may see such zeal and dedication more evident in unbelievers than we do in true followers of Jesus Christ. How does that work? We who are Christ's have the most precious gift in the salvation that comes to us by grace through faith through the merits of Jesus, because of His holy and righteous life, and His all atoning sacrifice for our sins upon the cross. And yet so many Christians seem to be rather blasé about this message of God's love and forgiveness. It's almost like any minor inconvenience for Christ is a big deal and we don't want the gospel to get in the way of life. At the same time we see these others who in fact have no hope being so zealous for their religion. It appears that they value that which they perceive to be coming because of their effort and merit as being precious (even if it is only delusional) while we take the free gift for granted, as if it was cheap and available at our convenience.

Another aspect of this is our attitude toward those who are so dedicated to something that we know will only bring them destruction. We convince ourselves that there is no point in sharing the gospel with them, no matter how much (or little) we care about them, because they are not going to listen to the gospel anyway. So what's the point of making the effort and of possibly embarrassing ourselves? They might even get upset with us pushing our religion on them. We are selling the gospel short! Our text reveals --

II. The Transforming Power of Jesus' Word.

On Saul's way to Damascus Jesus appeared in that bright light challenging Saul, and the zeal with which he persecuted the children of God. "Why do you kick against the goads?" It was as if Saul were kicking against those sharp sticks used to prod oxen as they pulled their loads. It was as if Saul was intent on hurting himself in resisting the way of the Lord. Saul was taken aback! He couldn't imagine who this power, this authority could be that

challenged him. To hear the voice of Jesus, to experience the power of Jesus in the light, to feel the blindness that expressed the spiritual blindness that truly afflicted Saul's soul, these were life changing things for Saul! The voice of Jesus was the real power for it was the voice of our living and all powerful Lord that confronted Saul with his sin of persecuting the people of God. Persecuting believers in Christ was in fact persecuting Jesus Himself. Saul was brought down in contrition, and had to be led by his companions to Damascus where he awaited the Lord's answer to his prayers.

Now, let us consider this experience carefully lest we arrive at a faulty conclusion. Our minds might suggest that if there were such signs accompanying our testimony to others than of course they also would be moved to repentance. The power was not in the bright light. Neither was the power in the blindness that afflicted Saul. The power was in Jesus' word. We have that word entrusted to us in Holy Scripture. There is power in the Word. There is power to convict the soul of sin, and there is power to lift a soul to faith and heavenly peace. Saul himself would later write of this power in his epistle to the Romans.

Romans 1:16-17 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith.'"

It was the power of Jesus' Word accompanied by the working of the Holy Spirit that transformed this dedicated man from one being dedicated to persecuting the Church of God to one who was zealous for the gospel of Christ. Saul realized the horror of his sin, and he was brought to realize the amazing extent of God's grace to forgive one who was chief of sinners. And surely that is exactly how Saul saw himself. He would later write to Timothy:

1 Timothy 1: 12-17 And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, 13 although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. 14 And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ

Jesus. 15 This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. 16 However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Ananias, a faithful disciple living in Damascus, was afraid to believe that Saul could actually be changed in this way. This grace of God, this power to save was so amazing in this sinner named Saul that the Lord assured Ananias that Saul needed an answer to his prayer, and that Ananias was the one who should deliver that answer. Jesus assured Ananias that the Lord had a special ministry for Saul, a purpose which revealed that Saul was in fact

III. Dedicated by the Lord to Preach the Gospel

Acts 9:15-19 “But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.’

We have some very important truths presented to us in this text. Saul was chosen by the Lord. He was chosen by the Lord to be a vessel for the gospel. He was chosen by the Lord to carry that gospel of life and salvation to the Gentiles, and yes, also to kings, and then also to the people of the Jews. Saul did not take this upon himself. He was chosen and dedicated to this service by the Lord. Saul’s life would be dedicated to this ministry, and he would suffer many things for Jesus’ name. The power to do, as well as the power to endure, would not come from the strength of Saul’s character. It was to come to Saul, whom we know better as Paul, from the Holy Spirit whom the Lord Jesus poured out upon him.

And so in obedience to Christ’s command Ananias ministered to this man who had been so dedicated to the persecution of Christians, and who by the power of the gospel was transformed and dedicated for the remainder of his life to the proclamation of the gospel of Christ. Saul was strengthened in body and spirit as he was received into the fellowship of the believers in Damascus.

“The Lord added to the Church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47) including Saul of Tarsus.

And so it continues yet today. The Lord has placed us on this earth, and called us to be His disciples. He has chosen us, not to fulfill an apostolic ministry like Paul, but to share the right word with the right penitent sinner, like Ananias did with Saul. We may be inclined to think that this individual over here, or that sinner over there would never hear what I have to say. But the Lord is the one who works powerfully in sinners’ hearts calling to repentance and life. The Lord also works in our hearts. Pray for the Spirit to work in your heart, to increase your faith in Christ and your confidence in the gospel. Pray that the Lord grant you the blessing of being dedicated to the gospel of life and salvation. Pray that you also might be dedicated to using your days to reach out to those who are spiritually blind knowing that the Lord’s grace is poured out in amazing proportions upon lost sinners, even as this grace was poured out into our hearts so that we have life and salvation in Jesus’ name.

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.