

## 1 Corinthians 15:9-10

June 21, 2015

Pastor P. Martin

Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY

Pentecost 5

*1 Corinthians 15:9 For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. <sup>10</sup> But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

### NO MATTER WHAT YOU ARE COMING FROM

*TURNING THINGS AROUND SERIES*

#### I. Getting Turned Around

Testimonials are becoming more and more important. You know, “Great product. Love what you are doing here. Will recommend to friends.” More and more people look at the internet and social media to get other people’s opinions before they make a purchase. Many people, when they shell out hard-earned money, want to hear what other customers, not just salesmen, think about a product.

Now, I am thinking about another kind of testimonial. Have you ever attended a church where people gave testimonials? (Actually they usually call it a testimony.) At a certain time in a church service, a person might be given the chance to stand up and talk about what God has done in his or her life. Often these testimonies start by telling about a person’s life before coming to faith in Jesus. That takes guts, especially when someone confesses a wayward life. The Christian testimony ends with the person talking about how God turned things around in his or her life.

This is not necessarily a bad practice, but there are reasons we don’t do this in our churches. One of the biggest reasons is that testimonies can give the impression that Christians are perfect people. It can leave the message ringing in the ear that sinful people and unbelievers are the same thing, and that believers just plain don’t sin any more. But every Christian in his heart of hearts knows otherwise. Coming to faith means that we confess sin; coming to faith means that we try by God’s grace to avoid sin; but coming to faith does not make us perfect. God may have changed us, but his work is not yet complete.

Having mentioned that concern about testimonies, listen to the Apostle Paul give one in our reading today. Now before I read it, I need to settle one thing. This man whom we usually call the Apostle Paul was born with the name of Saul. He changed it to Paul several years after he became a Christian. Today I am going to mention one man by two different names: Saul and Paul. It’s the same guy.

Having cleared that up, let’s listen to Saul’s/Paul’s testimony: ***“I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. By the grace of God I am what I am”*** (1 Corinthians 15:9). He says, “Yes, I am a Christian, but I don’t deserve to be.”

The historical record of the Bible is very open about this. In Jerusalem, maybe a year or two after the church got going, a Christian named Stephen was attacked by a mob. That mob, they stoned him to death. The Bible says, that those rock throwers wanted to really wind up and get a good throw—the intent was to kill—so they took off their coats and put them at the feet of a young, up-and-coming man named, guess who? Saul. And here is the chilling statement: *“And Saul was there, giving approval to [Stephen’s] death”* (Acts 8:1), that mob execution in the streets. We know this Saul as the Apostle Paul.

A little later, this Saul got official papers to go to different places and imprison Christians. How do you turn around someone headed in that direction, a convinced Jesus-hater?

En route on one of those assignments, something happened. *“As [Saul] neared [the city of] Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. ‘Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.’”* (Acts 9:3-6). Saul didn’t come to believe in Jesus because of his own change of mind. He was not a spiritual person who found an answer that worked for him. Paul came to believe in Christ, in spite of himself. The only way to turn someone from the path to hell is to confront them with Jesus.

In one way or another, that is how each of us has come to know his Savior. It is not our wisdom, it is not our earnestness, our searching. God had to come to us and do what he did in Paul’s life. God had to convince us of our unworthiness and sinfulness, that we are lost and condemned creatures. But when God creates that conviction within us, and when we wonder, “What then can I do to be saved?” God gives us this answer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.” That is why, in a different letter, Paul gave this heartfelt testimony: *“Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy... Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst”* (1 Timothy 1:13-15)

Jesus’ cross was where Paul’s sin was nailed, penalty paid. Jesus’ cross is where our sin was nailed, penalty paid! That is how things get turned around. We simply stop trying to think that we can stand before God on our own merits, and admit that we cannot. And when we admit that, we find out that Jesus has already taken care of all our sins.

No matter what you are coming from, no matter what you have done in life, no matter what your attitude toward God has been, Jesus has paid for it all. We can only be spiritually turned around in Jesus Christ.

## **II. Where the Christian Goes Once Turned Around**

This change, this turn-around has practical implications in our lives. Let’s imagine this: What would you think if the CIA director promoted a former terrorist to the second-in-command at the CIA? No matter how good he is professionally and personally, no matter how loyal for the last decade, you have to consider his terrorist past. You could trust him 90% or 95% or even 99%, but not 100%.

Yet God did that with Saul of Tarsus, also named Paul. From the moment God called Paul to faith, he called him to be his ambassador to the nations around Israel. Long ago, that word “Apostle” in the non-religious world was an official word for an ambassador. An “Apostle” did not come on his own whim, but with the authority of a nation. In the New Testament, when “apostle” is used in the church, it likewise breathes the air of God’s authority.

The apostle Paul had terrorized the Christian community, but God appointed him to a key leadership position. God took his former greatest earthly enemy, he picked him up, turned him around, and made him the man who, humanly speaking, did more than any other human to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul was a superstar among God’s people.

Growing up, my dad was a Minnesota Vikings fan. He still is. I think at least ½ of why he enjoys being a Minnesota Vikings fan is just so he can antagonize my mother who is a Green Bay Packer fan. Anyway, growing up watching Sunday afternoon football with your father as a child, you are sure that your father’s team is the best team out there. Even if they don’t win the title, you are sure that there is something morally superior about dad’s team. So he surprised me one Sunday. The Vikings got demolished by the Chicago Bears, almost single-handedly by a running back named Walter Payton.

After the drubbing, my dad added insult to injury and said we had to listen to the post-game interview with Walter Payton, the enemy. We listened. When it was over, my dad asked, “Did you hear what he said?” We didn’t get it. “One of the best running backs of all time, in one of his best games, and he never bragged once.” Dad wanted us to remember that. Humility is a rare find; humility with greatness—you just don’t find that.

Listen to one of the “greats” of the Christian faith. ***“By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”*** In a sense, Paul was the greatest of all the apostles. He visited more lands, suffered more violence, won more converts for Christ than any other. But listen: ***“not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”*** That is part of turning things around. A Christian must be humble. All that we are is thanks to God. Any good in us is God’s working.

This spiritual humility is a good thing. But it sometimes gets misdirected. You know like when someone does something really good and says, “Nah, it was nothing.” I’m not saying people who say that are bad or wrong. They are humble people who just don’t know what to do with the attention. But don’t downplay it, because if we say that it was God who did whatever good we did, then we say it was nothing—you get what I’m saying? Consider compliments opportunity to give glory to God.

Paul could look at himself and say, “Yes, I guess you could say that I am the greatest of the apostles. But it wasn’t me, it was God who gave me the ability to do that.” And he could look at himself and say, “Yes, I worked harder than any of the other apostles—but it wasn’t me, it was God working in me.”

This is part of the miracle of being turned around by Jesus, redeemed from our sinful lives. As we realize that God has done everything, that our role is not to appease him, but simply to love him who first loved us; when we realize that God has accepted us and empowered us, then we begin to accept ourselves.

Paul, a man with blood on his hands, exemplified that Christian self-acceptance when he said, ***“By the grace of God I am what I am.”*** Now we should realize what Paul is not saying with this.

- Most people use this phrase, “I am what I am” to cover their faults. They mean it this way, “I am who I am, and I dare any of you to try to change me!” Or they might mean, “I have a weakness for alcohol, but that’s who God I am.” Or, “I use God’s name in vain, but that’s okay because I am what I am.”
- When Paul says, ***“By God’s grace I am who I am,”*** he uses it in the exact opposite way. He says “I am who I am” in regard to his virtues, not his faults. He means to say, “If there is anything good, loving or gracious in me, it is God working in me.”

When God turns us around, when he turns a human being to see believe and trust in his Savior, his life changes. We become accepting of who we are, because we know that we, in Jesus Christ, are acceptable to God. It is not an acceptance of everything the Christian does, because we still sin. But it is an acceptance of us who have repented and by his grace have claimed him as our heavenly Father.

Yes, by God’s grace we are what we are. The Christian stands rescued by the undeserved mercy of God. The Christian stands pointing to heaven, because God gets the glory for any and all good in us. Amen.