

Simply Christ

Gospel Newsletter

Sharing the simplicity that is in Christ

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Chief of Sinners

Why would the apostle Paul, a man who according to every scriptural record lived an impeccable and godly life, refer to himself as the chief of sinners? Is there a part of his life we know nothing about? Or (as some insist) did he have a secret besetting sin? Did he truly consider himself the worst of the worst, or was he just expressing false humility? When considering all the sinners he helped bring to Jesus Christ in his ministry, how could he still consider himself the chief?

When we look at the scriptural record of Paul the apostle, the idea that he had a secret or besetting sin is absurd. If he did, we should discard everything he wrote that we call scripture because his worst besetting sin would have been hypocrisy. Look at some of his words in reference to himself.

“For neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloke of covetousness; God is witness: Nor of men sought we glory, neither of you, nor yet of others...” | Thessalonians 2:5-6

“Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily and justly and unblameably we behaved ourselves among you that believe:” | Thessalonians 2:10

“But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation

of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.” II Corinthians 4:2

Paul manifested the gospel he preached in every way; in heart, in life, in action, and in the power of the Spirit. He was not a hypocrite. He preached what he believed; and what he believed was the secret of the godly and victorious life he lived. It was Christ living in him!

Before he came to Christ, all evidence is that he was a sincere and devoted man. In fact he did not commit sin, as he understood it to be. After becoming an apostle he referred to his life before his conversion to Jesus, saying, “...*touching the righteousness which is in the law, (I was) blameless.*” Philippians 3:6. He was devoted to the Jewish faith, zealous of the Law, and highly regarded by others. Galatians 1:14. Even as an apostle, he reminded Peter that before believing in Jesus, they as Jews had not been sinners like the gentiles. Galatians 2:15. So what was it that caused this man to refer to himself as chief of sinners? To understand the truth sometimes we have to read more than just three words.

“And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.” I Timothy 1:12-15

Paul's claim of being the chief of sinners is based upon what he did before he surrendered to Jesus Christ. Just two sentences prior to calling himself chief of sinners, he reminded us that he *"...was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious:"* Even though he *"did it ignorantly in unbelief"* he still did not excuse himself. Paul told the believers at Corinth *"For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."*

I Corinthians 15:9.

As Paul gave witness before King Agrippa, he had this to say: *"...many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities."* Acts 26:10-11. Paul never downplayed or whitewashed his horrible actions. He was open and honest about what he had done.

How could someone do such horrible things *"ignorantly in unbelief"*? The answer to that question is found in the Law of Moses. Under the Law it was commanded: *"And he that blasphemeth the name of the LORD, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him..."* Leviticus 24:16. When Paul (Saul of Tarsus) gave witness for Stephen to be stoned to death, the charges were that Stephen *"...ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law..."* Acts 6:13-14. Saul of Tarsus believed his persecution of the church was fulfilling the righteous judgement of God against blasphemers. As an apostle he would

look back on his zeal for God under the Law saying, “...Concerning zeal, persecuting the church.” *Philippians 3:6.*

I believe Paul’s words in the 7th chapter of Romans speak of his time of persecuting the church. As he gave himself to this mission of stopping the “blasphemers,” something began to work in him. Hatred for these “blasphemers” took hold and began to consume him. The scripture says Saul was “*breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord...*” *Acts 9:1.* Yet they did not respond with hate; just as Stephen used his last breaths to pray “*Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.*” *Acts 7:60.* Saul began to recognize that something was not right in his own heart, but when hatred and rage get a stronghold in you, it becomes the one in control. He said, “*For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.*” *Romans 7:15.* I believe Saul knew he was out of control, but he could do nothing to stop the rage that rose up from within. This “Jesus hater” who had been so righteous in his own sight finally began to realize that he was the one who was “*carnal, sold under sin.*” *Romans 7:14.*

When Paul surrendered to Jesus Christ, the grace of God washed the sin and hatred from his heart, life, and nature *I Corinthians 15:10,* but he never forgave himself for being a persecutor of the church. Can you imagine the effect on Paul, who suffered so much to reach the souls of men for Jesus Christ, when he considered those he had caused to be put to death for their faith in Jesus? Or what about those he had compelled to blaspheme the name of the Lord? Do you think Paul ever forgave himself for causing them to

renounce their faith and damn their own souls? Paul's heart must have been broken over and over again when he remembered these things. The love of Jesus Christ and the souls of men meant more to Paul than even his own soul Romans 9:3, yet he had once done everything in his power to destroy both. You would never convince him that among a world full of sinners whom Christ came to save, he was not the chief of them all!