

Would the real “Paul”, please stand up...

Before the Apostle Paul became a Christian, his birth name was the very Jewish-sounding, “Saul”. And Saul was a Jew’s Jew. He’d been trained by a very highly respected Rabbi, Gamaliel, and he had become a very zealous member of the party of the Pharisees. (The Pharisees[you may recall], are the ones who always seemed to be at “loggerheads” with Jesus).

And before Saul met the Risen Lord Jesus (on the road to Damascus), he believed very strongly, that he was doing God’s work, by stamping out the very existence of those heretical Christians.

So, that’s one side of Saul (very Jewish), but he was also a Roman citizen. Roman citizenship was a very expensive privilege to purchase, but Saul didn’t have to pay for his – he was a Citizen by birth... And more than once, Saul’s citizenship saved him from floggings without trial, and summary judgment... And also, his Citizenship ensured that he was a slave to no man...

Now, as a Jew, Saul lived by the Old Testament Law. He believed that the only salvation available (to anyone), was **through** the Law. And although he was born in Gentile territory (a gentile is basically anyone who’s not a Jew), he cut himself off from the Gentiles – after all, to a Jew, the Gentiles were unclean.

But everything changed:

When Saul was travelling, on his way to Damascus (where he intended to arrest more of those dastardly Christians) Jesus confronted him. And he was blinded with a bright light,

Acts 9:4 *And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"* **5** And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "**I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.** **6** But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

You see, Jesus had a purpose for Saul. Through that “Jew’s Jew” (who hated Christians so much), Jesus was going to save the Gentiles....

And thus, began one of the most amazing transformations, that this world has ever seen.

Saul, who began to use the name “Paul” (which had more of a Gentile ring to it) understood very well, the immensity of God’s grace... Saul was very aware, that he was the worst of sinners – He’d personally been responsible for hunting down Jesus’ precious children, and arresting them, and throwing them into prison. He had personally overseen the execution of Stephen (and maybe others)... Saul was a man, who had hated much, and he became a man who was forgiven much.

And so, he understood very well, the enormity of God’s grace.

- He’d been set free from **his** sins (which were multitude);
- He’d been forgiven for **his** rebellion against God (which had been unrelenting);

- He had also been set free from the unachievable burden, of trying to keep right with God by keeping the Law;
- In Christ, he was **truly** free, and he understood this freedom very well. He valued this freedom, so much.

Paul became a master, in giving grace. You see, those who have received “Grace”, and who have experienced the freedom of the Gospel, are the ones who are best at **giving** Grace, and the ones who live by Grace...

And those who are free-est, are those who give up their freedom, for the sake of others.

The way Paul lived out the freedom that we have in Christ, made it a little bit difficult at times, for us to get a picture of, “Well, which is the real Paul?”

We read in his letter to the Galatians, where he utterly condemns those who insist that if the Gentiles wanted to become Christians, they had to become Jews first, and they had to get circumcised and they had to keep the Jewish food laws... And Paul says “No way”... “I don’t know what that Gospel is, but that’s not the Gospel of Grace – That’s not the Gospel of Christ – that’s a distortion.”...

The Gospel of Christ, is all about grace. It’s not the keeping of these religious rules and regulations.

Ahh! There’s the true Paul – always teaching grace – don’t make anybody yield to the Law...

But then we read in Acts 16, where Paul meets Timothy, and he wants to take Timothy with him on his missionary journeys, and because they're going to be taking the Gospel to Jewish territory, what does Paul do? He circumcises Timothy before they go...

And again in Acts 21, Paul goes through all of the Jewish ritual cleansing process, to purify himself before going to the temple...

Really???... Is **that** the true Paul??? The one, who is so adamant that we are cleansed by the blood of Jesus, going through a religious ritual to get cleansed????

What's going on? Sometimes he's yielding to the Law, and other times, he's getting **up** people for promoting the Law... Which is it?

Paul's an easy target, to accuse of being “two-faced”. They can't work out where he was at – Was he more Jewish? Or more Gentile? He seemed to fit in with both. He seems to amend his customs and practices, depending on who he was running with. Some might've said “*He runs with the foxes & hunts with the hounds*”.... – you never know what side he's on....

Here's the lesson: “Let's throw out this language about “sides”. In Christ, there are no sides. The Gospel isn't about taking sides... The Gospel is about giving up everything (that doesn't matter so much), to love. It's about giving up

everything (that doesn't matter so much), so that someone who is not saved, might be drawn to Jesus...

Paul gave up his preferences; and he gave up his rights; he amended his customs – for the sake of the Gospel...

He was a free man. He was a citizen of Rome – he was a slave to **no man**... **And** he was a citizen of the Kingdom of God – He was totally free in Christ...

But he says here: “I’m free, but I make myself a slave to all,,, to win them for Christ.”

You see, the way Paul behaved (customs & practices) (mixing it with the Jews – mixing it with the Gentiles) (living like a Jew when he was with the Jews – living like a Gentile when he was with the Gentiles) wasn’t only for the sake of the Gospel – it’s the very nature Gospel... It’s the living, breathing expression of “Gospel”. It’s the physical demonstration, of the Good News of Jesus Christⁱ.

One commentary puts it like this:

“The apostle did not stand on his dignity, but adapted himself to the position of his hearers, in a whole-hearted determination to win them for Christ.ⁱⁱ”

Now, that doesn’t mean that he’d descend to doing anything sinful or immoral...

- If he was taking the Gospel to idol worshippers, he wouldn’t begin worshipping idols, to make himself ‘relevant’;

- If he was taking the Gospel to thieves, he wouldn't 'get relevant' by becoming picking some pockets himself;
- If he was taking the Gospel to heavy drinkers, he didn't get drunk, himself....

v21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.

He didn't pretend that he was free to do whatever he liked. He was still under the law of Christ. And so he would always conduct himself righteously and morally... But if anything wasn't unrighteous or immoral in itself, and if it was a barrier to others coming to Christ, (if it was a morally neutral action), well it wasn't a problem at all for Paul, to amend his ways.

Sometimes he'd go to quite extraordinary lengths, if he believed it was going to help him win another person for Christ.

E.g.

When Paul went to Athens, which was the university town (if you like), where all of the philosophers and all of the academics, would enjoy gathering together to hear each other spruik on about their latest philosophies (their latest beliefs) and their understanding of the gods...

Now, as a Jew, Paul had had it drummed into him, "not to have anything to do with this". I suspect his personal preference would've been to avoid having to deal with it at all.

But when he went to Athens, if he was going to win these academics and philosophers for Christ, he had to be able to talk to them on their level.... And so he did some research. He walked all through that city, looking at all their various gods; studying the inscriptions that had been written about them; He studied their poets, and he knew them well enough, to even quote them when needed...

How would you feel spending a couple of weeks studying the Quran? Maybe, “Owww!”

Well, up ‘til now I haven’t needed to. But if my next-door-neighbour was a Muslim, then I would have to study the Quran, so that I could better understand what he believes, and know better, how to lead him to Christ...

I wouldn’t enjoy doing it at all. It’s not my preference to spend a couple of weeks reading something ungodly like that, but if by doing so, it helped me to win someone for Christ, well that’s an example of what Paul did in Athens.... And you might think “That’s extreme”. Yeah, it is.

Likewise, when Paul went on mission to the Jews, he became as a Jew.

Although Paul was quite free of the Jewish law himself, when he took the gospel to the Jews, he didn’t do anything that was going to unnecessarily offend the Jews... It wasn’t a sin for him to circumcise Timothy; It wasn’t a sin for him to go through the Jewish cleansing ritual... And so (although it was unnecessary for him to do so), he did these things, so that the Jews wouldn’t be offended and reject him before he even got a chance to tell them about Jesus.

^{v22} To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

How is he sharing with them in the blessings of the Gospel? .. By leading **them** to the knowledge of Jesus, the repentance of sin, and the gift of eternal life – Something that **he** already has, and now he's sharing it.

Righto:

V24-27, are very often taken as 4 verses (all on their own), and that's all the preacher might preach on for the day... And by doing so, these 4 verses are often disconnected, from the subject that they're actually talking about...

When Paul talks about running the race to receive the prize, he's talking about "going to any lengths, in giving up our own preferences (or our own rights; or our own customs), to win the unsaved for Christ." He's talking about becoming all things to all people – about putting **ourselves** in 'unfamiliar' situations (and unpreferred situations), for the sake of giving an unbeliever, a better chance of meeting Jesus.

Let me read it:

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do **not** run aimlessly; I do **not** box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

What a great metaphor for giving our all for God...

Now, when he says “**all the runners run, but only one receives the prize**”, that doesn’t mean that only one person in the whole wide world is going to ever please God in their Christian life, and so the rest of us might as well give up... His point is, about the importance of training – it’s about being ‘race ready’; trained; fit;,,, and it’s about putting in our all, to run the race well, not being distracted by anything that’s not so important...

He says “**I do not run aimlessly**”.... So many Christians just coast along in their Christian life, enjoying their status of “Being the Redeemed”... And they never intentionally look for ways that they can connect with unbelievers.

A very real predicament, is to become so consumed and so engrossed and so enveloped in our church family, that we never take time to cultivate relationships with **un**believers. The challenge is, for us to get intentional about connecting

with unbelievers, and intentionally finding ways to bring Christ into those relationships.

He also says “**I do not box as one beating the air**”.

When I was a young fella, learning to use an axe (and I missed where I was aiming), or learning to drive a nail (and I missed the nail), or learning to shoot, (and I missed the little dot on the cardboard box). Dad would always have a saying for that...

And so he might've been teaching me to split posts (with a sledge hammer and wedges), and I'd take a mighty, great big swing with the sledge hammer, and “Thud” – miss the wedge and hit the log...

Without fail, Dad would say something like “The first time he hit it, he missed. The second time he hit it in the same place.”

Are we missing with the Gospel?

To win the prize, Paul didn't make a habit of missing. He wasn't pretending, or performing pointless motions – he made every opportunity count...

Now, I know I've missed opportunities – we all have... But we can change that – we can make the most of **every** opportunity.... You realise what he's talking about here??? He's talking about getting intentional, and putting aside anything that **unnecessarily** makes it harder for us to connect with an unbeliever...

“Like what????”, I might hear you ask. Oh, I don’t know...

How about this:

- If you’re anything like me, you probably feel ‘most at home’ ‘most comfortable’ and ‘most relaxed’, when you’re in the company of other Christians... We love our brothers and sisters in Christ. But how about inviting an unbeliever around for a meal? And how about getting intentional, and asking them, “What’s going on in your life, that you would like me to pray for?” Who knows where a question like that might lead???

Or how about this one:

- I’ve never been to a B&S. I don’t want to go to a B&S... But what if next time they’re planning a B&S in St George, Bush Disciples offers to the organising committee that we set up a ‘time out’ tent, where anyone who wants to, can come for a bit of quiet and a cup-of-tea and a listening ear...

That’s just 2 examples of how we can intentionally share Gospel, with unbelievers...

But there is a little warning here for us as well: Paul talks about exercising self-control in all things. And he says ²⁷ **But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.**

Let’s not forget, that no matter how long I’ve been a Christian, I’m still subject to temptation, and you are too. When mixing

with unbelievers, self-control is so important. The whole purpose of connecting with unbelievers, is to be a witness for Christ, and to win them for Christ.... The danger, is “To become so connected with the world, that we ourselves become worldly.”

Christ always comes first. There is no other god before Him. There is no other god beside him.

And for Christ to be first, means the Gospel trumps our rights and our personal preferences, and our customs. These things fade into the background, as we amend the way we do things (we may even amend our whole lifestyle), to both honour Christ, **and** to aid in the salvation of unbelievers.

We've received grace (a lot of grace). I (like Paul), recognise that I am among the most underserving,,, but God has given to me, His immense grace... True for you too??? We are recipients of His amazing grace.... And so, (like Paul), let's become masters in giving grace.

In our freedom, becoming slaves to all, in the hope that some might be saved...

Questions????

ⁱ To stand alongside the Jew, the Gentile, the socially dependent and vulnerable, or to live and act in solidarity with every kind of person in every kind of situation is to have a **share in the nature of the gospel**, i.e., to instantiate what the gospel is and how it operates.

In Thiselton, A.C., 2000. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*, Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

ⁱⁱ Morris, L., 1985. *1 Corinthians: an introduction and commentary*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.