

Acts 22

Introduction: We are all born needing to be born again. Our nature is tarnished, tainted or fallen. One of aspect of our fallen nature is the tendency toward self-righteousness. We try to count points or build up credits for ourselves to prove that our lives are meaningful. Self-righteousness can cause us to look down on others who are “unenlightened”. They are not who we are, they don't know what we know, they don't do what we do. At its worst, self-righteousness makes “unrighteous others” into the enemy. This is what happened to Paul as a young man. He was trying to put himself right with God through his own moral effort. His was an extreme case. He became so zealous that began persecuting Christians as a result. Then he met Jesus and everything changed. His story teaches us a vital truth.

Message: Only Jesus can put us right with God.

We left Paul at the temple in Jerusalem in the midst of an angry mob. Someone falsely accused him of bringing Greeks within its precincts – a terrible sacrilege at that time. The crowd became so upset it took the Roman army to prevent them from killing him. Before Paul was taken into custody he asked if he could speak to the people. He wanted to tell his fellows Israelites his conversion story – how he went from hating Christians to being one of them, from hating Jesus to loving Him.

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- I. Paul thought he was right with God without Jesus 22:1-5 (especially v.3)

- A. Righteousness through Birth: Many Jews in Paul's day were not simply OK with who they were as Jews. They felt right with God and superior to others as a result. After all God had chosen them as His own people. He gave them the prophets, the temple and the Scriptures. This was intended to point them to the Messiah. Some became racist instead.

We should all be comfortable with our heritage. It's part of how we look, think, speak and act. Ethnic identity makes us unique, but not virtuous. No group is better than any other.

- B. Righteousness through Education: *brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel*. Gamaliel was probably the most respected rabbi of that day. Paul was one of his prize students. Paul was able to tell the Galatians:

Galatians 1:14 (NKJV) And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries ...

Paul was a model student. But none of Paul's learning could put him right with God.

Think about it: There are many good, kind, wonderful, godly, well-educated people. There are also many selfish, conniving, evil, well-educated people. Sometimes better educated people simply commit smarter crimes. Instead of robbing a convenience store with a mask and a gun, they are embezzling millions from corporations. Education can expand our understanding and increase our opportunities, but it can't put us right with God.

Only Jesus can put us right with God.

- C. Righteousness through strictly keeping a law: Paul's view of spirituality involved keeping specific traditions, keeping commandments and living up to a certain moral code. The problem with this idea is that it fails whether we are keeping our chosen code or not.
- i. If you feel you are not keeping your code, you feel like a guilt-ridden loser.
 - For example, if I believe I must always be kind (a good principle), I'm going to inevitably see numerous occasions on which I was not kind enough. "Did I do the wrong thing? Did I say the wrong thing? Did I say the right thing in the wrong way? Oh, I'm so unkind. I simply must learn to be kinder!" End result: I'll probably be one of the kindest people around, but I'll feel bad about how unkind I am.
 - If raising well-behaved godly children is my standard of righteousness, then I'll become obsessive about all that my children say and do. Anything that falls short of perfect godliness in my kids will destroy me inwardly. I'll have to come up with all kinds of excuses for them – or take just it out on the kids.
 - Name the code that you need to live up to and you can be sure you will be challenged by keeping it, mortified if you don't and defeated when you can't.
 - ii. The only thing worse than the guilt of *not* living up to your preferred moral code might be *actually living up to it*. Because this leads to exactly the sort of self-righteousness that absorbed Paul the apostle while he was still Saul of Tarsus the Pharisee.
 - What if you feel you are kind? How do you begin viewing unkind people? Kindly? Not always. You may begin to resent them, look down on them, feel superior to them. "What an unkind person! At least I'm not as unkind as they are." Enter self-righteousness. I forget that **Only Jesus can put me right with God.**
 - If my children are well-behaved and godly, I can begin feeling superior to the parents of kids that always get in trouble. I feel self-righteous. "I'm such a good parent." God may be pleased with my parenting, but He'll be unimpressed by my attitude. **Only Jesus can put me right with God.**
 - Ironically, even if I adopt open-mindedness and tolerance as my code of conduct, once I reach a certain level of tolerance I will begin to feel a lot less tolerant of intolerance, of any I perceive as narrow-minded bigots. My self-righteousness can become just as Pharisaical as that of the self-righteous bigots that I condemn. **Only Jesus can put us right with God.**
 - "Moral Code Righteousness" is exactly what got Paul into trouble. Paul the young Pharisee was zealous for keeping traditions, commandments and laws. He was working hard to live up to the strictest Pharisaic standards available. The Christians were saying that **Only Jesus can put us right with God.** He hated that and, therefore, he hated Christians.

II. While zealously living his religion Paul met Jesus 22:6-16

A. 22:7-8 *Why are you persecuting Me? ... I am Jesus ... whom you are persecuting.*

- i. Look how closely Jesus identifies with his church. Paul was persecuting followers of Jesus. Jesus perceives this as persecution of Himself.
- ii. It turns out that Paul's most passionate conviction was wrong. Paul the Jew, Paul the well-taught, law-keeping, zealous Pharisee was not impressing God at all through all of his hard work, but rather (horror of horrors!) fighting against Him.
 - This side of the gospel is devastating to my ego. If I thought I could put myself right with God by relying upon my ethnic identity, the group I choose to belong to, my education, right thinking, good behavior or zeal, I'm now sunk. The best I can do will lead me to despise others who differ from me, who are outside my circle, those unenlightened people who are not as “wise” or “righteous” as myself. When that happens, I find I'm now I'm fighting against Jesus, who loves and cares for each and every person passionately.

B. 22:10 A real encounter with Jesus gives us something new to do with our life.

Ephesians 2:8-10 (NKJV) ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹not of works, lest anyone should boast. [So where does that take us?] ¹⁰For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

C. 22:16 *Arise and be baptized* Baptism is the way given in the New Testament to publicly acknowledge our faith in Jesus Christ. Through baptism we publicly identify with Jesus in his death and resurrection. We are saying publicly that **Only Jesus can put us right with God**. And this publicly identifies us with his church.

D. *Wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord* Forgiveness of sins comes by calling on Jesus, who died to save us from them – from both the consequences of our sin and the power that sin has over us.

- “Sin” is not a very dignified word. It's not elegant, not refined, not cool . In our culture it sounds outdated or irrelevant. “Who can say what's sin and what isn't?” But “sin” is a biblical word and it is very useful. Sin describes what's wrong with the world, what's wrong with other people and ultimately, what's wrong with me.
- Sin is that part of me that allows me to be evil when I give in to it. It causes me to do things that I regret. Sin has me thinking thoughts that are excusable only when I think them, but are really awful when they are in the minds of others.
- **Only Jesus can put us right with God**. He did that by dying for our sins. When we call upon Him we receive complete forgiveness.

III. Paul's life now began to revolve around Jesus

22:17-21

- A. Jesus is now calling the shots in Paul's life. Paul has to give up control. At conversion, we consciously make our life a part of the story of Jesus.
- B. When you give up control of your life to Jesus, you now have a conversion story. Like Paul, you can say “This is what I was like before I met Jesus, this is how I met Jesus, and this is what's going on with me now that I'm following Him.”
- C. When you come to grips with the fact that Jesus gave the ultimate sacrifice for you, that God loves you more than you ever dared to imagine, it's an exhilarating thing. It's something you'll want others to hear about. That doesn't mean they'll respond well to it.

IV. The Response to Paul's Story

22:22-30

- A. Another angry mob. The book of Acts is full of them.
 - i. Some people are bothered by the miracles in the Bible. Others are bothered by the commandments. I'm kind of bothered by all the angry mobs. The reason is it's always the good guys, the heroes in the Bible that have to confront them. Paul is the good guy.

Conclusion:

Only Jesus can put us right with God. This rules out anything else that we might ever hope will do so.

- We each begin life with a fallen, flawed or tainted nature. As soon as we can be held accountable for our actions, we do something wrong. This is the devastating effect of sin. None of us is right with God genetically. We are born needing to be born again.
- We can't educate ourselves into a right standing with God. We can't learn our way into it. Education develops our mind but never alters our nature. We still need Jesus.
- We can't "turn over a new leaf", pick a moral code, and then live up to it. If our code is high enough to make sense, we will only fail to keep it. If we pick a code low enough to allow us to succeed, we can feel very self-satisfied, self-righteous and miss out on Jesus.
- At worst, we begin to feel superior to the unenlightened others out there who disagree with us. Those who don't understand what we do become our enemies. They become demons who need to be stopped. But wait, Jesus died for all of their sins too.

The only solution is to turn our lives completely over to Jesus – to allow ourselves to become a part of His story. Paul isn't in the Bible because of Paul, but because of Jesus – because of what Christ did with him. Paul is an example of someone who stopped forming his identity around who he was or what he could do and allowed Jesus to be the center of his existence. Here's how he put it:

Philippians 3:4-9 (NKJV) ⁴though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: ⁵circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; ⁶concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

⁷But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. ⁸Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;

Only Jesus can put us right with God.