Paul: People Pleaser or Servant of Christ?

We started looking at heroes in the Bible who resisted the temptation toward people pleasing behaviors under very difficult circumstances. The last post focused on David and his choice to please God over the King of the land, Saul. This time we'll turn our attention to a different Saul, the **Pharisee Saul**, who later became Paul.

At the beginning Saul was striving to be the most devout Pharisee he could be. This took studying the scriptures, being able to reason and argue for his beliefs among his peers, using the scriptures. He chased power and authority, taught what he believed to be true and he put into action his beliefs. That is what brought him to the Damascus road.

Saul was on his way to arrest Christians who followed a virtually unknown teacher, to bring them to court with charges of heresy and unfaithfulness to the Mosaic Law that all devout Jews were to follow.

Saul believed what he was doing was protecting God's Law and God's people from a radical new sect that would draw them off course from following God the way the Law told them to.

It must have been a great shock to Saul to hear God's words. (Acts 9:3-4)

"As he neared 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."

Saul may have thought, for a moment, that God didn't know he was defending and protecting the Law and God's name with his actions; not persecuting!

Saul had many credentials to stand on, he had power and authority from the leaders to arrest the Christians. He was sure his zeal for God's honor was evident.

This is how Paul described himself before he met Jesus on the Damascus road: (Philippians 3:4-6)

"though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

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If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ***circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.***

But God had a different plan, he was going to use all that knowledge, oratory skill, and zeal in a new way. God put another disciple of Jesus in action to help, his name was Ananias (Acts 9:10 -16).

"In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, 'Ananias!'

'Yes, Lord,' he answered.

The Lord told him, 'Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.'

'Lord' Ananias answered, ***'I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.'***

But the Lord said to Ananias, 'Go! This man is ***my chosen instrument to proclaim my name*** *to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.'"*

So here is the rub. Saul was known and supported as a powerful Pharisee. He was being asked to give that up and instead take up the mantle of Christ's humility, love, patience, and restraint. To become the full opposite of what he had been!

The desire in his new work to please God and tell others about Christ, to shepherd the new churches that were beginning around Christ's teachings, to now protect those he once hunted; *this* new desire had to outstrip and outshine any old desire he had for notoriety, for power, for authority that comes from humans.

After choosing to follow Jesus, Paul was at a decision point every time he was challenged, to not soften his stance or go back to seeking the accolades of the world in favor of pursuing the honor that comes from following Christ. Of course that following didn't always look like honor.

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Here is Paul's description of what he "suffered" while following Christ. (II Corinthians 22-29)
"I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and ***been exposed to death again and again****.* ***Five times*** *I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.* ***Three times*** *I was beaten with rods,* ***once*** *I was pelted with stones,* ***three times*** *I was shipwrecked, I spent* ***a night and a day*** *in the open sea, I have been* ***constantly on the move****.* ***I have been in danger*** *from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often* ***gone without sleep****; I have known hunger and thirst and have* ***often gone without food;*** *I have* ***been cold and naked****. Besides everything else, I face daily* ***the pressure of my concern*** *for all the churches."*

If not for the deep convictions that Jesus' Way is the best way, how could Paul have continued in the face of these dangers and persecutions; especially from those that once supported him and applauded his work as Saul the Pharisee? How did he not give up and go back to the glow of human adoration?

Here is the thesis statement and reminder from Paul, for us, in Galatians 1:10, as we're working to overcome people pleasing behaviors:

"*Am I now trying to* ***win the approval of human beings, or of God****? Or* ***am I trying to please people****? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ."*
Wow! That last sentence straightens my spine and fires my conviction to focus on pleasing God. How about you?

Approval and recognition from others possess addictive powers of which we must resist the temptation to follow, as individuals seeking to overcome people pleasing behaviors**.** As servants of Christ, let's focus on pleasing God and winning *His* approval!

Consider: What approval challenges do you face when you are striving to live authentically and follow Christ? What former life patterns have you been tempted to go back to, whether for security, accolades, acclaim, or simply to not cause a disturbance? > What choice will you make to pursue God's approval over that of humans?

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