

"Words for Pastor and People" (Part 2)

(Show 4 photos of ordinary looking people). These 4 people have something in common. Any idea what that might be? Well, each of them is on the FBI's "Most Wanted" list of terrorists in the world. You don't want to meet up with any of them!

(Show an artist's painting depicting the Apostle Paul. Who is this? This is an artist's painting of the Apostle Paul. He was first known as Saul of Tarsus, and he was a first century terrorist! Christians feared him. He was the face and embodiment of evil.

Acts 8:3 (*The Message*) says, "And Saul just went wild, devastating the church, entering house after house after house, dragging men and women off to jail." Acts 9:1-2 says more about Saul (or Paul): "Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem."

Toward the end of his life, appearing before King Agrippa, Paul describes his fanatical zeal to rid the world of Christians: "Indeed, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is what I did in Jerusalem; with authority received from the chief priests, I not only locked up many of the saints in prison, but I also cast my vote against them when they were being condemned to death. By punishing them often in all the synagogues I tried to force them to blaspheme, and since I was so furiously enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities" (Acts 26:9-11).

But something happened to this man – Saul of Tarsus. He met Jesus! Christ appeared to him in a vision on the road to Damascus, and he was converted. This man, who was fanatical in his goal to wipe out Christians and their faith, now became the number one promoter of Christianity in the ancient world!

He tells what happened to him in his letter to Timothy, in the section we're looking at today in this series of sermons from 1 Timothy. "I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he considered me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus"(1 Timothy 1:12-14).

Paul just bubbles over with gratitude for what Christ has done for him! He received mercy! God's grace overflowed for him! He breaks into a doxology: "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (1 Timothy 1:17).

Jesus transformed him! In spite of his opposition to the gospel, Christ appointed him to His service (verse 12). God used the example of Saul's transformed life to show how Christ can change other people's lives too! "But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience as an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:16).

Here in a nutshell is the life changing power of the gospel: This is what I was before I came to Christ. This is what Christ is doing to change me. This is how God is using me to spread the message about Jesus.

Now it's one thing to talk about Paul's dramatic conversion, but do good people, nice people, religious people, need to be converted? Yes! Jesus said unless we are born again, we can't see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). Jesus said, "Unless you are converted (which means to turn) and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Jesus said unless we repent, we will all perish (Luke 13:3). "Repent" means to turn around, to turn from our sins and turn to God. No matter how "good" we are, or how religious we are, we still sin and fall short of the glory of God. Our sins separate us from God.

Soon after I became pastor of my first church, one of the men in that church thanked me for preaching the gospel and the need to be converted. He told me how a guest speaker had once come to the church and said conversion was okay for people like Paul – really bad people – but not everybody needed conversion. I can't be sure that guest preacher said what Howard *thought* he said! But if he did say only people as bad as Paul need to be converted, I think he was wrong!

Look at verse 15: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." That's why Jesus set foot on this earth! A former employee of the National Park Service in Valley Forge tells of a mentally disturbed man who decided to climb up the steeple of the Valley Forge Episcopal Church. Halfway up, he decided to take his clothes off. When he got to the top, he realized he was afraid to climb down, so he yelled for help. The pastor of the church called 911, and two different fire companies responded, while the man was up there yelling, "Save me! Save me!"

While all of this was happening, the pastor, standing by one of the police officers down below, smiled and said, "Get that man down! This is an Episcopal Church! We don't use that kind of language around here!" (Hopefully he was kidding!). *Sometimes churches can get sidetracked with marginal things, and forget our primary mission of telling lost and broken people that Jesus saves!*

Paul goes on to say, "And I am the foremost of sinners" (verse 15b). The Greek word "foremost" means "sinner number one"! Who's the worst sinner in the world? "I am", Paul says! I don't think Paul was neurotic about his sin. Elsewhere he describes himself as being "blameless" in his keeping of the Jewish law. I just think he was overwhelmed that God had shown him such mercy, after all he did to persecute Christians. You know, there are times when I feel like I'm the worst sinner in the world!

Whether we consider our sins "big" sins, or "little" sins, sin is sin. And it separates us from God. A Catholic priest, who had become very hard of hearing as he got older, encouraged members of the parish who came to confession to write their sins on slips of paper, and hand it to him in the confessional booth, rather than speaking them to him. It worked very well, until one day the priest, with what hearing he had, heard a heavily-breathing man enter the confessional, and

fumble for a few moments as a small, crumpled up piece of paper was passed through the curtain into the priest's hand. The confessions read: "Two cans of beans. Quarter pound ham. Cans of Coke. Four fish filets. Bread rolls. Toilet paper. Large coffee. Soap. Butter." The priest, puzzled, studied the note for a moment, then handed it back. Suddenly there came this loud, agonized voice from the other side of the confessional: "Mother of God! I've left my sins at the supermarket!"

'Where do you leave *your* sins? What do you do with them? We can choose to ***cling*** to our sins. ***Continue*** in our sins. ***Conceal*** our sins. Or, we can ***confess*** our sins and leave them (not at the supermarket), but at the cross of Christ. And there find forgiveness, and strength to overcome them!

In this section of 1 Timothy, Paul writes of the transformation Christ has brought into his life! Is this something you can point to in your life? A time when you turned away from your sins, and turned your life and will over the Christ, our Savior? If you haven't yet taken that simple step towards conversion, you can do it right now!

Mitsuo Fuchida grew up loving his native Japan and hating the United States because of our harsh treatment of Asian immigrants in the first half of the 20th century. Fuchida graduated from a military academy, joined Japan's Naval Air Force, and by 1941 had logged 10,000 flying hours, establishing himself as the nation's top pilot. Not surprisingly, Fuchida was chosen to lead the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. It was Fuchida who spoke those words, "Tora! Tora! Tora!" (Tiger! Tiger! Tiger!).

The day Pearl Harbor was bombed, Sgt. Jake DeShazer was on KP duty at an army air base in Oregon when news of the Japanese attack blared over the loudspeaker. DeShazer threw a potato against the wall in a rage and shouted, "Those Japs are going to have to pay for this!" His deep hatred for the Japanese motivated him to volunteer for a dangerous mission. He became a bombardier and a crew member of Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle's "Doolittle's Raiders". But on one mission, after bombing Tokyo and other cities, his plane ran out of fuel. He and the crew abandoned their aircraft and parachuted to the ground. His crew was captured, and he spent 40 months as a Prisoner Of War - 34 of those months in solitary confinement. The torture that he endured was unbelievably inhuman. But he was one of those who survived.

After months confined to their cells, the prisoners begged the guards for some reading materials. Finally, in 1944 their captors relented. Among other books, they brought a Bible. Each man eagerly read it for his allotted 3 weeks. The light in DeShazer's cell was dim, but he read the entire Bible several times, memorizing a number of passages. The Bible's message made its way into his heart, and on June 8, 1944, DeShazer prayed for forgiveness, trusted Christ, and experienced the joy of salvation. Among the Scriptures that etched its way into his heart were Jesus' command, "Love your enemies."

When the war was over and DeShazer was liberated, incredibly he felt God telling him to return to Japan to share the love of Christ. He got a degree from Seattle Pacific College, got married,

and in 1948 he and his wife sailed to Japan as missionaries.

Meanwhile, Gen. Douglas MacArthur had sent a message through his staff chaplain to the President of the Bible Meditation League to print something that might help heal the wounds between Japan and the U.S. The Bible League printed 1 million pamphlets of Jake DeShazer's testimony, "I Was a Prisoner of Japan", for distribution throughout the country.

One day in October of 1948, while waiting at a rail station in Tokyo, the man who had led the raid on Pearl Harbor, Mitsuo Fuchida, was given a copy of DeShazer's testimony. He went to throw it away, but when he saw that it was written by a Doolittle flier, he read it with interest. He bought a Bible, though he didn't get around to reading it for months. But when he did, he found that the Bible's message gripped him, especially Christ's words from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:24). He wept as he realized Jesus had prayed and died for him. In September, 1949, he gave his life over to Christ.

Fuchida and DeShazer met in 1950. DeShazer had just recently finished a 40 day fast for revival in Japan when Fuchida came to his home and introduced himself. DeShazer welcomed the new convert and encouraged him to be baptized. And he *was* baptized on Easter Sunday in 1951. While DeShazer continued to plant churches in Japan, Fuchida became an evangelist, spreading a message of peace and forgiveness in his native country and throughout Asian-American communities.

Fuchida died in 1976. But he wanted to be remembered, not for leading the infamous attack on Pearl Harbor, but for the life that was changed through the power of Christ. He wrote: "That morning (December 7th)...I lifted the curtain of warfare by dispatching that cursed order, and I put my whole effort into the war that followed...(but) after buying and reading the Bible, my mind was strongly impressed and captivated. I think I can say today without hesitation that God's grace has been set upon me." That's what Paul wrote to Timothy! "The grace of the Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 1:14).

You don't have to be totally depraved, or a world-famous sinner to need the Lord, or to need the salvation He offers! What Jesus did for Paul, and Matsuo Fuchida, and Jake deShazer, He can do for you, and me! Stuart Hamblin wrote a song with that theme:

"The chimes of time ring out the news, another day is through
Someone slipped and fell, was that someone you?
You may have longed for added strength, your courage to renew;
Do not be disheartened, for I bring hope to you."

And then the chorus:

"It is no secret, what God can do. What He's done for others, He'll do for you.
With arms wide open, He'll pardon you. It is no secret, what God can do."

