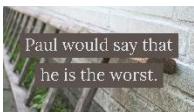


WORST TO FIRST



If someone were to ask you how good of a person you think you are, what would you say? In his book *Just Walk Across the Room*, Pastor Bill

Hybels talks about an evangelistic technique he uses called The Ladder. He asks the person he's talking to the exact same question that I just asked. And when the person gets done stumbling around the question, he throws them a rope. He says, "Let's answer this: do you think you're a better person than Jesus?" The obvious answer is no, so he goes to the top of the ladder. So then, the question becomes: "Do you think you're better than Mother Teresa?" And the answer is no. But did you know that Mother Teresa freely admits that she falls short of the glory of God and did not live up to the standard that God had in mind for her? So, she goes to the middle of the ladder. Hybels puts Billy Graham underneath Mother Teresa, and then finally himself a ways below Billy Graham. Finally, after all that is done, he says, "Where would you put yourself?" He says that the person usually puts themselves above the very bottom of the ladder and below him. So, there's a gap to overcome. A gap between what God wants for us and where we are. We have to find some way to overcome the gap.



If you would have asked Paul the Apostle that very same question, he'd probably put himself near the very bottom of the ladder, or even at the very bottom. Paul wasn't very high on self-esteem; he'd probably say that he's the worst. Actually, Paul says that in our scripture this morning. Depending in the translation we read from, Paul essentially calls himself the chief of sinners. And I guess he has a reason why he feels that way. Paul comes from a bit of a checkered past. All throughout his life and ministry, he has been very honest about his background and what he deserved

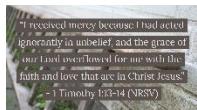
because of it. He says in our scripture this morning, “I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.”

Yes, Paul was a blasphemer, one who would insult or show contempt for God or things that are sacred. In his younger days, he was convinced that he “ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth.” Paul was a persecutor, locking up many of the Christian saints in prison, and pursuing them “even to foreign cities.” And Paul was a man of violence, casting votes against Christians “when they were being condemned to death.” Did you know that the very first time we read about Paul in the Book of Acts, he is known by his former name, Saul, and he is watching over the stoning over Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Acts 8:1 is the end of the story of Stephen’s stoning says this, “And Saul approved of their killing him.” This is how we first meet him. We go on to learn in the book of Acts that this first incident started a string of persecutions that basically ended up with Saul “ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women.” And he owns this reality by naming this to his young friend and mentee Timothy. He knows that his gap on the ladder is pretty big. Like all us in the world, Paul has a gap. God had an intention and desire for what Paul’s life was supposed to be and look like, which was a path of righteousness, the path where Paul’s life would look more like the life of Jesus. And even though after his encounter with Jesus on the Road to Damascus meant he no longer killed Christians, Paul still believed that his gap was so big that he was the chief of sinners. That he’s at the bottom of the ladder.



The thing about the ladder that we talked about earlier is that we all have a gap. There's a gap we all have between who we are and who God

intends for us to be. God has placed a high calling on our lives, to live in such a way where we reflect divine righteousness to the world. But we fall short. Despite our best efforts, we are humans and sometimes those human instincts and tendencies take over. And we can do everything in our power to overcome that gap, but it will never work. We can try to climb the rungs of the ladder



But rather than give up hope, Paul tells Timothy and all of us the good news: “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.” Paul was saved from a life of violence and evil by the unexpected mercy that God showed him. And notice how Paul puts it: the grace of God was not doled out in small measures, but it absolutely “overflowed” for him. Divine mercy and grace made it possible for the persecutor Saul to become the apostle Paul, and arguably the world’s greatest for the Christian faith. By the mystery of the grace of God, Paul is taken from worst to first.



Christian writer Philip Yancey was asked to give a definition of grace, and he answered, “I don’t even try.” But he did tell a story. “I remember once getting stuck in Los Angeles traffic and arriving 58 minutes late at the Hertz rental desk. I walked up in kind of a bad mood, put the keys down and said, ‘How much do I owe?’ The woman says, ‘Nothing. You’re all clear.’ I said I was late, and she smiled, ‘Yes, but there’s a one-hour grace period.’ So, I asked, ‘Oh really, what is grace?’ And she said, ‘I don’t know ... I guess what it means is that even though you’re supposed to pay, you don’t have to.’ That’s a pretty good definition of grace, isn’t it? “Even though you’re supposed to pay, you don’t have to.”

Paul was supposed to pay for his life of blasphemy, for his persecution of God's people called the church, for his violence toward Christians. Paul was supposed to make up for his gap somehow. But he didn't have to. Instead, the grace of our Lord overflowed for him with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

We are supposed to pay for our gap, too. We are supposed to make up somehow for the ways in which we fall short. The miracle is that grace says we do not have to. Grace says that Jesus paid it all. Grace says that, if we accept what we're being told and believe in our hearts that Jesus is who he says he is, that we are elevated. We are taken from worst to first. The ladder gets flipped upside down; Jesus steps down rungs to pull us up rungs.

Once we've experienced and accepted grace, the challenge becomes what we do with this grace. Paul used it to become one of the greatest leaders in the Christian world. A similar opportunity is afforded to each and every single one of us. We can use this grace we've found to help elevate others, help others see what grace looks like, and through God's work bring others on this journey from worst to first.