

*Gracious God, may our words and actions reflect your holy Word to the world. Amen.*

Paul was a pretty great guy. He'll tell you! He followed all the rules his whole life, and he became successful because of it. He wasn't given anything he didn't earn. He made the right choices and was able to make something of himself. Everyone knew who he was and respected him because of it.

But, as it turns out, none of the accomplishments that had made Paul a success were the things that people would remember about him.

No one cares any more when he was circumcised or whether he followed every law in the Hebrew Bible. What people remember about Paul was that he was the greatest missionary of the early church. He was a prolific letter-writer, and some of the things he wrote were good enough to keep handing down from generation to generation in the new collection of Scriptures that were written by the first followers of Jesus.

When he was "successful," Paul was problematic for the earliest followers of Jesus. He witnessed and supported the death of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, according to Acts, chapters 7 and 8.

By his own admission, Paul was a zealous persecutor of the early church. He opposed anything that might threaten or call into question the values on which he was raised, and for which he had worked his whole life long.

The things that Paul was proudest of were the things that kept him from faithful living. So often, our egos get in the way of our relationship with God.

In Paul's case, he was so busy being awesome that he wasn't able to see the new and exciting thing that God was doing in his community, through Jesus and the followers of Jesus.

It wasn't until Paul was knocked down and blinded and cared for by a Christian that he was finally able to see clearly. In this transformative moment, Paul reprioritized his life, and ended up having a dramatic effect on the course of world history.

Truly.

Without Paul's missionary work, the church would have fizzled out in a few generations. But because of him, we are still here today, praying and praising and following Jesus!

Paul's is a success story.

Paul figured out how to rewrite his identity so that Jesus came first, and everything else – while still part of who he was – came second to his faith.

Not everyone learns so well and changes so completely.

Most of us like to think that we're pretty awesome.

We are good people!

We come to church, we give to charity, we volunteer, we make time for our family, we visit friends in the hospital, we remember to send thank-you notes.

These things become our identity.

In and of themselves, these pieces of our identity are not bad.

But when these are the only things that define us, we have based our entire identity off of *our own* works.

It is *God's* works that really define us. Anything else is just a bonus, just the icing on the cake.

Well, actually, Paul doesn't think that his other achievements are bonuses. He states that everything aside from Christ is rubbish, trash, excrement.

The word he uses in Greek is... a little bit stronger than that.

Here's how it works.

Imagine that you've lived in a cave your whole life. Lanterns and flashlights are how you get by. Every achievement that you reach becomes a new light source for you.

Paul was a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, zealous and blameless.

He had half a dozen lanterns and two dozen flashlights to illumine his world. Compared to us other people living in the cave, Paul was *lit*.

And then, the ceiling of the cave falls in. And for the first time, everyone can see the sun.

All of Paul's achievements fade in comparison to the overwhelming light of the sun.

He still has those lanterns and flashlights, but they just aren't as necessary any more.

Now, he – and all the rest of us in that cave – have the light of the sun to get us by.

The things that Paul thought were so important to his identity were still there – he still had those things – but they just weren't the most important thing.

When we've got the sun to light our way, we don't need to carry a flashlight.

It is the same for our own achievements.

We have things that define us, that we are proud of.

We are parents or activists or doctors or teachers or granddaughters or accountants or librarians. These are things that we are good at. They are important to us, to who we are and how we relate to others in this world. We don't need to deny these identities.

But we do need to prioritize.

Jesus calls us *first* to follow him. Nothing else matters until we make God our top priority.

We can be the best baker or musician or lefse-maker in the world! And all that Jesus asks is that we do it in service to him.

And this is why.

If we don't put Jesus first, we can find ourselves messing up, like Paul did.

When we get so wrapped up in our own achievements, we can end up condoning an unjust execution, as Paul did for the martyrdom of Stephen.

We can find ourselves prohibiting the growth of the church, like Paul did with his acts of persecution, even if our actions aren't as intentional as his.

It is so easy to think that we are not part of the problems of the world around us.

We have reasons to be confident! We are life-long churchgoers, we treat our neighbors with respect, we always remember to recycle.

As soon as we allow our egos to define us, we have stopped listening to the guidance of God, and we are at risk of falling away from faithful discipleship.

When we are so confident in ourselves, we fail to see our role in societal violence, systemic oppression, and the other ills of the world.

If we are too confident in ourselves, to the exclusion of dependence on God, we could end up like the tenants in the Gospel parable today.

The tenants were hired to keep the land for the landowner.

Now, certainly there are dynamics of first-century socioeconomics at play here, regarding the relationship between the landlord and the tenants, and the fact that the landlord owned slaves... but those issues are not the point of this parable.

For the sake of today's Gospel story, what matters is that there is a landowner who leases his vineyard to some tenants, and there is a clear expectation on both sides of their respective responsibilities.

The tenants fail to fulfill their side of the agreement. When the time comes to give the produce to the landowner, the tenants rebel and lash out in violence.

They have let their selfishness control their actions, and their perspective on the whole world becomes warped because of this.

Did they really think that they would end up inheriting the landowner's fortune if they simply got the son out of the way? *Really?* There were complicated inheritance laws that would have given the land to another son, or a brother, perhaps a nephew, maybe even a daughter! There is no way that the tenants would have made their way in to the succession of inheritance.

And in any case, the landowner is still living! How did they imagine that he would respond to their violence?

The tenants let their selfishness and their egos control their actions. They forgot their obligation to the landlord, and they messed up.

When we let our selfishness – our egos – control who we are, we are likely to mess up.

Thankfully, there is another way.

Paul shows us how, regardless of how much we may have screwed up in the past, there is always hope to reform ourselves and our actions.

If we've been doing things or believing things for our entire lives that we suddenly realize are wrong – if our habits are damaging to other people – it is still possible for us to change our ways and work to make the world a better place.

Paul got knocked down and blinded by God so that we don't have to.

We can learn from his experience and take a good hard look at our lives. What things have been keeping us from following Jesus? What has been harming our relationship with God and neighbor?

Our call to action today is to be like post-conversion Paul, to humble ourselves, and put our identity in Christ above all else. When we do that, we will be able to see more clearly how best to put our skills and passions and relationships to good use in God's service.

When we prioritize following Jesus above all else, our actions – like Paul's – can end up changing the course of world history.

Truly.

We become aware of our implicit racial bias, and in so doing, we can work to eradicate racism from society.

We become aware of underlying sexist expectations and behaviors, and in so doing, we can change them and work for equality of all genders.

We become aware of the economic systems in which we participate, and how those systems can help or heal others, and our awareness can help us fix the problems of poverty, hunger, and homelessness.

When we put Jesus first, the possibilities of how to better the world are literally endless.

So let's do it!

Following the example of Paul, let's press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Amen.