

Nathan Smith's sermon notes: June 29, 2003

Today I'm going to talk to you about a cruel, vicious scoundrel.

He was born as a citizen of one of the most powerful nations on earth.

He began as an idealistic young man, and rose to a prominent position in his society.

At the height of his political power, he killed many innocent people because of their religious beliefs.

He imprisoned and executed those who dared to speak out against him.

He took sadistic pleasure in carrying out these horrible acts of persecution until one day he was finally stopped.

You might think that I'm talking about King Herod or maybe Adolph Hitler.

While that description does accurately fit them, it also describes another man.

This man was Saul of Tarsus. We know him better as the Apostle Paul.

In Acts 7:54-8:3 we have an account of just how brutal he had been.

He was a ruthless and efficient killer who wanted to wipe Christianity off the face of the earth.

How in the world did a man like this become a humble servant of God who called himself chief among sinners?

He experienced the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ.

In Acts chapter 9 we have an account of this amazing transformation on the road to Damascus.

In verse 9:5, he asked, "Who are you Lord?" and Jesus replied, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

At this moment, he probably thought to himself, "That's it I'm dead. Jesus is mad and he's going to kill me."

But this was not the intention Jesus had for him. He received new sight and was baptized.

PERSONAL TESTIMONY: Drinking, Shoplifting, Hypocritically portraying God while betraying God.

Now the Holy Spirit was at work in Paul, and he began to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God.

He preached the gospel of salvation so much that other Jews plotted to kill him in Acts 9:23.

His role was now reversed. The mighty hunter of Christians had now become a hunted Christian himself!

But he was not discouraged. He kept right on preaching about the grace of Jesus Christ.

He wrote many Epistles to the early churches, and I would like to read briefly from one of them.

In the opening of Galatians chapter 3, he rebukes the readers harshly saying:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?

It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!

The only thing I want to learn from you is this:

Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?

Are you so foolish? Having started in the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?

Paul was saying that in order to receive the blessing, you have to believe that it comes free of charge.

If you want the blessing of salvation, you must believe that you cannot earn it.

God is infinite, but we are not. Therefore, there's nothing we could ever do to make him owe us anything.

Imagine a baby taking 5 croons, giving the money to the parents, and saying "I own the home now, move out."

This is what we say to Jesus when we try to earn our own salvation: "I don't need you, I can do it myself."

Since salvation is free, should we quit doing good works: Bible reading, praying, fasting, and going to church?

If following the law does not earn salvation, what good is it? Paul answers this question in verses 3:21-22.

Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not!

For if a law had been given that could make [us] alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law.

But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin...

So that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Paul is not saying that we should stop doing good works. We should do them for the right reason.

Imagine a soccer player whose father is a mean coach. He yells at him early every morning and wakes him up.

He makes him go running every day, constantly training him to be a better soccer player, but the boy hates it.

Now imagine a soccer player whose father is a kind coach. He teaches his son to love playing the sport.

The boy goes running every day, constantly training himself to be a better soccer player, and he enjoys it.

To the spectators in the crowd, both of them look the same – they are both really good players.

The only difference is: one boy plays because he has to, and the other boy plays because he loves to.

This is how we should be in our Christian lives. We do not serve an angry God. We serve a loving God.

If Jesus forgave Saul of Tarsus and made him into the Apostle Paul, he can forgive you and me.

If you haven't yet accepted the grace of Jesus Christ in your life, do it today. The altar is open.

And if you already have, let your love for Jesus shine as you live your life.

Galatians 3:28-29 says: There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free...

There is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

We could also add: There is no longer Estonian, Russian, or American. We are all God's children. Amen.