

The last time that I preached I focused upon the person of Saul of Tarsus, his socioeconomic position in society, his religious convictions, his professional aspirations and how this all came together in his confrontation by the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, which was his destination so that he could arrest "People of the Way" i.e. Jews who believed in the true messiahship of Jesus; and bring them to Jerusalem for trial as heretics. We also touched upon the effect this had upon Saul's later assessment of his own spiritual condition, a man who believed in the righteousness of the law but found himself unable to keep it.

He wrote to the church in Rome that he was hopelessly addicted to sin in terms of his behavior. "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me?" His self-assessment had changed 180° from what it had been that morning he had set out for Damascus, about 15 years before. We do not know all the words the Risen Christ spoke to Saul, but through his letter to the Romans we know their effect.

In order to understand this, we will need to change our focus, to those of the circumstances and words of the philosopher W. C. Fields late in his life. The ravages of drink and father-time had taken their toll. Fields was living in a nursing home. One day he asked one of the nurses for a Bible. "Are you getting religious in your old age Mr. Fields?" she asked. He replied, "No my little chickadee, I'm just looking for loop holes." Looking for loopholes was what Saul was doing and as an accomplished attorney, he was very good at finding them and felt unable to avoid using them.

What was the nature of some of these loopholes of sin? We find examples in Matthew 15 our Gospel lesson appointed for today. Jesus was trading insults with some Scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem. They were scandalized by the fact that the disciples ate with unwashed hands.

Jesus pointed out a much more serious sin which they committed. The Ten Commandments demand that they honor their Father and their Mother. Section 5 paragraph A of the Civil Code required them to support their parents in their old age. Using their inheritance if necessary. But through a legal maneuver, they officially designated this money a "gift to God" which could not be spent while the parents were still alive. "Sorry mom, sorry dad, no Medicare for you it's all been designated as a gift to God." We can't spend it while you're alive." One of the clever loopholes devised by the Scribes and Pharisees.

The Catholic chaplain whom we had at the V. A. Hospital in San Francisco had grown up in the city. He could remember when the local medical association opposed the health insurance that the Kaiser shipyards provided their employees on the grounds that it was communistic.

When I was the associate pastor at First United Methodist Church in Sacramento, we had a reading club that met every Tuesday morning. For several weeks, we focused upon the latest book by Dr. Karl Menninger, "What ever became of sin?" It was an alarming account of the "loopholes" discovered and used by major corporations and the vengeance they sometimes took against whistle blowers.

Saul of Tarsus remained a Jew all his life. He believed in the Jewish people as the agents of

God's moral and spiritual enlightenment for the world. And he came to believe in Jesus as the true messiah because Jesus lived out the moral reason behind the law. He gave it real validity. Saul did not bemoan the law. He bemoaned his own inability to keep it in spirit as well as in letter.

Saul was a great influence upon the development of our faith because he was able to see where he was wrong. His fundamental error was idolatry. He made the law an idol. In so doing, he violated God's first commandment. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." He worshiped the law. It gave him power and status. After meeting Christ on the road to Damascus, he recognized that the law was a tyrant whom he could never succeed in obeying

We usually obey the law religious or secular, because of fear of what will happen to us for failure to do so, so it is a matter of motivation by self-interest. Christ was not the law. He was love incarnate, God incarnate. Love focuses our attention on the needs of others. To love our neighbors as ourselves is to love God as He loves us in agape, self-sacrificial love. God is totally indestructible, totally secure. We, on the other hand, continue to exist only under certain conditions. We tend to be self-protective, self-centered. But God has made us in his own image and likeness. Therefore, we are far more secure than we realize. That is what Christ's resurrection teaches us. To be Christ like is to have eternal life.

The Rev. Dr. Leslie Weatherhead defined faith as follows: "We are told that something is true. There is reason to believe, but there is also reason to question what we have been told. Faith is to live as if what we have been told is true, is true." It can be hard to distinguish whether one is obeying the law motivated by self-interest or by faith, not just Jews who are given the law, but also Gentiles may do what is lawful because they have an inner motivation to do the right thing.

In Saul's time faith vs. the works of the law was the main conflict point between Jews and Gentile Christians. In Romans 4:3, Saul uses Abraham to illustrate the point. He says that Abraham lived before either circumcision or the law had come upon the scene, but Abraham put his faith in God, i.e. believed God, lived as if what God told him was true and it was considered as justifying him." In other words, it was faith that justified Abraham not works of the law. That is the core theological difference between Christianity and Judaism.

Are we addicts, slaves to sin as Saul of Tarsus confessed to being? "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." So we have all drunk it, smoked it, injected or ingested it in some other way whether others know it or not. Only when we admit our captivity can God help us find our freedom. We must admit our addiction before Christ can set us free to live responsible spiritual lives. But if we live as if we believe that, he will.

Preached August 20, 2017
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