

What Bible character do you most identify with? Do any of you identify with Moses? While you know that God has called you to serve him you're not sure whether or not you have the abilities to do what he wants. Or how about Martha? You're committed to serving your Lord but some times forget that listening to his Word is more important than making sure that casserole for the pot luck turns out just right. Maybe you identify with Peter. You're eager to do God's will but have the tendency to rely on yourself and so often fall short of accomplishing what God wants.

While we all can identify with those Bible characters in one way or another, I want to show you this morning how we can all identify with the Apostle Paul. Paul, the persecutor turned great missionary and gifted theologian? How can we identify with him? As we study our sermon text I pray that the Holy Spirit leads you to See Yourself in Paul's Story in three ways: as 1) chief of sinners, 2) chosen by grace, and 3) cheerful in service.

The beginning of Paul's story is not a flattering one. Paul summarized it like this: "I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man" (1 Timothy 1:13). The first time the Bible mentions Paul he's described as standing guard over the clothes of those who were stoning Stephen. Paul quickly went from supporting the persecution of Christians to leading it as he went from house to house to drag Christians off to prison. In all honesty, Paul wasn't any different from the terrorists of September 11th; he too thought that he was fighting a holy war and doing God's will.

Because of his past it doesn't surprise us that in our text Paul would humbly call himself the worst of sinners (v.15), after all he had caused God's people great pain and suffering. But when Paul claimed to be the worst of sinners he wasn't just referring to the past. He used the present tense saying, "I am the worst" (v. 15). In his sorrow over what he had done did Paul exaggerate in describing himself and his sin? Haven't there been people who have done worse things than Paul? Take King Herod for example. He had all the baby boys of Bethlehem slaughtered when he found out from the wise men that one of them was a king. Or what about Hitler? He not only orchestrated the deaths of 6 million Jews but caused a war that resulted in the deaths of millions of others. And what about Bashar Assad from Syria. He has killed over 100,000 people in his country in a bloody civil war. According to reports he has used chemical weapons on those who oppose him? Surely Paul could not be as bad as they?

Because of the way God's justice works Paul was correct in saying, "I am the worst sinner." When God calls us to give an account for our thoughts, words, and actions he does not do so to compare us to King Herod, Hitler, or the terrorists of September 11th; he compares us to himself. And what does God expect? Jesus said, "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Therefore if we have broken God's law in any way, no matter how small the infraction may seem to us, compared to God we are the chief of sinners

Brothers and sisters, see yourself in Paul's story and acknowledge that you too are chief of sinners. Don't fall for the Devil's lie that you're not that bad of a person compared to others and therefore will be accepted by God just the way you are. Perhaps we've been tempted to think that Nidal Halik Hassan who murdered 13 people at Fort Hood and injured 30 more, and Bashar

Assad aren't worthy of God's forgiveness? Have we been tempted to wish the torment of hell upon them? As our self-righteous pride carries us away to our own damnation our King patiently opens our eyes to reality. He reminds us that in God's eyes we aren't any better than those terrorists. We aren't any less sinful than they are. After all Yes, the terrorists will have to pay for their acts of destruction but so will we if we continue to live comfortably in our sin.

For Paul said, "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. 4 Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. 5 For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient" (Ephesians 5:3-6). Thankfully neither Paul's story nor ours ends in the court of God's justice; it ends in the palace of his grace. Paul went on to write, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15). Although you and I, and Paul can claim to be the chief of sinners we can be certain that God won't call us that. That's because God's Son, Jesus came to save sinners. As our Saviour Jesus paid for our sins through his death and gave us credit for his perfect life. Therefore when we stand before God's judgment throne God will not see our sins but the perfect blood of Christ that covers them. Just as sun block keeps harmful UV rays from damaging our skin so the Son's blood blocks God's holiness from destroying us.

What moved Jesus to leave his throne in heaven, take on human flesh and die on the cross to save us? Did he see some potential in us that drew him to us? Listen to what Paul says about why he was saved. "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. 14 The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 1:13, 14). God saved Paul because his grace moved him to do so. There was nothing about Paul that was appealing to God. He was an enemy of God and his Church. God reached out to Paul because he felt like reaching out to Paul.

Do you still see yourself in Paul's story? I hope so because Paul said in his letter to the Ephesian Christians, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Although our sinful nature can at times make us believe that God is pretty lucky to have us as believers, or that he chose us because he saw some potential nothing could farther from the truth. He chose us even though we were and are chief of sinners; he chose us because of his grace.

Perhaps the famous preacher John Newton explained it best when he said, "When I get to heaven I shall see three wonders there. The first wonder will be, to see many people there whom I did not expect to see—the second wonder will be, to miss many people whom I did expect to see; and the third and greatest wonder of all, will be to find myself there." Yes, it is truly wonderful isn't it to think that God would choose us to be his own!

While we might think that that's the end of the story it's not. Just as Paul's life didn't end

with his conversion neither does ours. Paul wrote, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service” (1 Timothy 1:12).

God not only brings us to faith, he puts us to work in his kingdom. For Paul that meant starting churches all over the world. For us it may mean cleaning the church, helping out sick friends, being an usher, greeter, singing in the choir, praying daily, serving on a committee. Serve where God has placed you keeping in mind that to serve means to help others, not yourself.

One of the greatest ways we can serve Jesus is by being a church that welcomes sinners. Sometimes we can be like the Pharisees in our Gospel lesson today. We’re selective with who we would like to come into our church. If you’re a good person, if you have your act together, then come on in. But if you have problems, if you’re struggling with some different sins in your life, we would rather that you stay away. Only the good people who have their act together are welcome in this church. Not the sinners. WE all have sinful natures that make us think that way sometimes.

But that’s not our attitude at Open Bible. We want all to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth. We are technically all the worst of sinners. Thus, we look for those lost sheep and those lost coins. And those lost sheep and lost coins are going to be sinful. They’re going to be rude. They’re not going to have any time for you. They’re going to love money. They’re going to have rough language. Maybe there’s alcohol there, or drugs, or morality problems, or all that put together. They’re going to say to you, “If I ever walk into your church, the roof would cave in.” They’re going to promise to see you on Sunday, and then never show up. That’s who we’re here for, to look for them, and to welcome them. Do you know anyone like that? Those are the lost sheep. They belong to Christ. And he is sending you and me and everyone else out to look for them, and to welcome them.

I started the sermon this morning by asking you which Bible character you most identify with. I hope you’ve been able to see yourself in Paul’s story because after all, Paul’s story is a Christian’s story. We all are the worst of sinners, we all have been chosen by God’s grace, and we all have been appointed to serve God cheerfully. May God bless you with a heart that loves and welcomes sinners, just as Christ loves and welcomes you. You all have people in your lives, that sinfully skip church and make excuses. That’s your mission field. And when that total stranger walks into our church, don’t shut the door on him. Treat him as you would want to be treated. What a wonderful God we have, who loves us and welcomes us. May we reflect that same love toward others. Amen.