

Paul - Go Big or Go Home

"God takes our messes and turns them into masterpieces"

2 Corinthians 12:9 ESV

It's really easy to put people up on a pedestal, especially those that we find in the scriptures. It almost sounds sacrilegious to think they were fully human, even though they were - and, they had fully human moments. They were human beings being human. Always remember that we are dealing with real people in the Bible. These were people just like us - they had real emotions - real failures. They had great *victories* too, but we tend to see their lives as a highlight reel - almost like watching ESPN, showing those great moments where everything was amazing.

But, we forget there were a lot of things that led *up* to that great moment, and there were probably a lot of failures as well. This in no way diminishes the value of these individuals, but when we see them as fully human but still used by God - God working *through* them to do great exploits - it actually gives *us* hope, and encourages *us* to say, *"If God can do that through them, maybe he wants to move in us, and through us, to make a difference in this world - to literally change the world - to change the landscape of this world."*

We've talked about the idea that there are "no perfect people allowed". We *know* that - there's *none*. We are *all* Mr. and Mrs. Dumpty. We've *all* sat on a wall and had a great fall - or two - or three - or *four*... We've had moments where we were fully human - human beings being human. And, because of that, we come together as this group of imperfect people, so why would we think that the *church* should be perfect?

The reason a church isn't perfect is because *we* all showed up today. That's the reality of the human condition. We're not perfect - but God *is* in the process of perfecting us. He's making us whole. He's bringing our lives together. He's integrating all the broken pieces to come together for Mr. and Mrs. Dumpty. Thankfully, the Bible recounts all of the messes of the people in it. God could have selectively edited all of that out, but for most of us, that would've looked like Instagram life - social media life - where everything's great in our highlight reel.

But, we all know that in between the highlights, there's some *low-lights*. That's what we've been talking about in this series, and now we'll take a look at a man who was called Saul in the beginning, but, after getting knocked off his high-horse, became Paul the apostle. His personality was go-big-or-go-home. The Bible says he was small in stature, but he was all-heart and all-in. As we look at Paul's life, we find that:

- he wrote thirteen books (letters or epistles) or about half of the twenty seven books in the New Testament.
- he was responsible for the spread of Christianity into new countries, and took at least four missionary journeys, setting up outposts or small churches planted all over those nations and territories for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- he was a spiritual father to many followers of Jesus, and he raised up the next generation of elders, missionaries, pastors and church planters.
- he preached the Good News to kings, governors, religious leaders both Jew and Gentile, servants, and common people.
- God worked amazing miracles through him - he healed the sick, cast out demons, and even raised up Eutychus from the dead after he fell out of a window while Paul was teaching a long lesson.
- he carried a huge anointing on his life and suffered for the sake of spreading the Message.
- he was beaten - he was pelted with rocks to the point of death - he was imprisoned several times - he was tortured and eventually martyred in Rome.

The apostle Paul went through a lot, and he had some amazing, epic moments - some great *highlights* - but he also, like you and me, had some fully-human moments.

Conflict between Paul and Barnabas

Acts 15:36-41 NASB

"After some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let's return and visit the brothers and sisters in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.' Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul was of the opinion that they should not take along with them this man who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. Now it turned into such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas, and left after being entrusted by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches."

Acts 13:13 NASB

“Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; but John left them and returned to Jerusalem.”

John (John Mark) was afraid, having seen demonic manifestations and the resistance against them. Being young, he didn't have the capacity or the maturity to handle it, so he bailed on the team, and Paul wasn't happy about it.

Acts 15:39 NASB

“Now it turned into such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas [which means son of encouragement] took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.”

There are two ways to see this. One way is that this is terrible - they should have brought Matthew 18:15-17 back in and reasoned together - the second way is, instead of going as *one* team, they instead, ended up going as *two* teams doing the work of the Gospel. When it comes to spreading the Gospel and advancing the Kingdom, God is not nearly as concerned about our emotions - the touchy-feely. He's about getting things *done*.

Today, we think that conflict is the most terrible thing *ever*, but God can use conflict to actually get things done on a broader basis. God's missionary plan doesn't always look like ours, and conflict may not always be the worst thing in the world, but how we handle it shows our maturity - or *lack* thereof. Now, *two* teams are going out instead of one.

Galatians 2:11-14 NASB

“But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of some men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and separate himself, fearing those from the circumcision. The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, ‘If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?’ ”

Conflict between Paul and Peter

Peter's personality was "*open mouth-insert foot*", and Paul's was "*go big or go home*". Together, they made massive sparks fly - two big, bold personalities coming together. All of these people were Spirit-filled, full of Jesus, and yet, there was still conflict. Peter was with the Gentiles - eating, enjoying and participating in everything - but then when the Jewish believers showed up, he completely caved to peer-pressure. He pushed away from the Gentile believers, showing hypocrisy - and Paul called him out for it.

It's beautiful when friends call you out - it doesn't *feel* good, though. Speaking the truth in love brings conviction, and then we grow up. Paul was calling out a friend - a brother. Old patterns and ways were pulling them back in like a bungee cord.

Galatians 2:20-21 NASB

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly."

This passage was birthed out of a conflict - the difference between the Law and Grace - our identity in Christ. Not all conflict is bad. May we all have friends in our lives - brothers and sisters in Christ, who, in love, can speak the truth where we are not offended but elevated - not crushed and defeated, but built up, motivated and empowered to make change. God gives us *friends* in our lives who, in love, call us out for our own good.

Paul had to call these men out. He did it because he loved them. It wasn't all sweet and nice - Paul had a fully-human moment as well. We need to know that the reason why God places us into the body of Christ, or into a given community or church, is that sometimes he puts us up against people that are going to rub us the wrong way. That could very well be God's plan, because he cares more for your character than he does for your comfort - that he will place you up against people who will sharpen you, "as iron sharpens iron."

If you're looking for a church where you can just feel good all the time - where you can just come and go - you may not be in the right place, because God put a bunch of imperfect people in this one.

But, he *did* it so that, together, as we rub up against one another - as we *do life* together - as we *cringe* sometimes together - as we have *moments* together - as we have fully-human situations that arise, the right response isn't, "*Well, I'm outa here!*" The *right* response is, "*Father, what do You want to teach me through this? What are You saying to me? Is there an area that you're trying to shape up, or knock off, some rough edges of my life?*"

That's the right response. Could it be that God brought you here, or placed you in the job you don't like, in order to not only bring the Gospel through you, but also to teach you some things? We never graduate from God's school of theology - it's a never-ending process. And, could it be, that God's trying to sharpen you, and grow you, and help you? Sometimes he does it by putting you up against somebody that rubs you the wrong way.

Not all conflict is bad. In one conflict, *two* mission teams went out, and did twice the work that *one* could. In another conflict - a fully-human moment - one of the greatest passages in the New Testament was birthed - the Grace scripture, Galatians 2:20. Christ, living his life through us - the life that we now live in him - is through faith in the One who died for us.

Maybe we weren't expecting this message, but, could it be we've identified good friends calling us out because they love us? Maybe something has happened recently that we interpreted as a terrible thing, but that actually produced *growth* in our life - something positive and life-giving that helped us re-evaluate and check certain things in our own life.

That's the Good News... the Great News!

Prayer

Father, in Jesus' name, thank You that You left the fully-human moments of these amazing people in the scriptures. We can see them - we can relate to them. We can connect with them, and sometimes even feel the pain or conflict they've gone through. And, we can feel it because, we too, have walked through these fully-human moments, as we are human beings being fully human.

Lord, if any of us feel less than loved - less than worthy - less than worthwhile - speak into our hearts to say that whatever happened in the past, You, God, can turn it for good. You take our test and turn it into a testimony. You take our mess and turn it into a message. So, Lord, we surrender to Your goodness - to Your Grace - and to what You are producing in us and through us. We love You! In Jesus' name. Amen