

In this lesson we will see the change in Saul's life and then we will see the remarkable acceptance by the very church that he was seeking to exterminate. We will also look at two other men who were transformed by the Power of the Gospel – Ananias¹ the timid disciple and Joseph surnamed Barnabas, the bold and compassionate disciple.

In a previous lesson we saw the power of the Gospel in action but now we will see the power that comes out acceptance and forgiveness as it is lived out in the lives of the believers of Saul's day.

I would like to bring these points to the front: the church has three powerful “tools” if you please that will result in a great outreach of the Gospel. First, as previously taught, we have the power of the Gospel.² Secondly, we have the giftedness that God gives to every sinner who has been saved.³ Thirdly, if I can take the liberty, we have the resultant sinner who has been *forgiven and accepted* not only by God *but by the church!* It is this third topic we will expand this morning.

The Lesson of Acceptance Given by Our Lord Himself.

Please turn to Matthew 18. I would like to make a couple of points from this chapter.

- God highly values every believer - [Matt 18:10](#).
- The importance of forgiveness and acceptance among believers - [Matt 18:15-20](#).
- The importance of forgiveness illustrated - [Matt 18 ff](#).

God highly values every believer. I wish to point out that every believer (the “little one” to whom Jesus refers) is to be valued and therefore accepted and forgiven by the church even if that little one has offended the church in the past. We are not to look down on any believer. It would have been easy for the early church to do so regarding Saul but as we will see in a bit, that was not the case. That is quite a mouthful to swallow. I'm not advocating carelessness by the local body – quite the contrary there should be careful examination and discipleship by the local body so that every believer is recognized as beloved of God and is accepted by the local church.

It is not the scope of this lesson to go into detail on how this is done – only to say that every sinner who walks through the doors of this church and receives Christ as savior should walk out accepted by the local church.

It is very important for the local church that we all have accepted each other and value each other as beloved in the Lord.

Acceptance and forgiveness in the local church is very important. I don't think Jesus intended for us all to develop a case of ultra sensitivity but at the same time we are not to brush aside the issue of forgiveness as unimportant. It is very important for

¹ Name means Jehovah is gracious.

² [Romans 1:16](#), [Eph 1:19](#)

³ [Eph 4:7-13](#)

the local church that we all have accepted each other and value each other as beloved in the Lord. This section is the “gold standard” of behavior so that the church is kept in touch with the Lord and the needs of each other. Without this approach nurturing a new believer or for that matter a mature believer along and encouraging him in ministry is at jeopardy.

God takes a very dim view of an unforgiving spirit. Jesus completes his admonishing to value and forgive one another with the

We Should Value Believers Because Our Heavenly Father Does.

~~¹⁰ Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.~~ ¹¹ For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost. ¹² How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? ¹³ And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. ¹⁴ Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish. Matthew 18:10-14 (KJV)

Please notice that we are not merely talking about children although they certainly are to be included. All believers are in the scope of our Father’s love and care. If we know that God the Father highly values an individual the question is this – how much more care should we give to our attitude towards each other by way of acceptance and forgiveness?

We Should Never Become Unforgiving or Toward Our Fellow Believers.

Read [Matthew 18:21-35](#) (NKJV)

Again, a long passage but no less important to make the point of this lesson. When the church becomes unforgiving – that moment it becomes powerless. I can honestly say that this is such an important issue that we as a local church will become a twisted caricature of what our Lord intended. Without acceptance and forgiveness of one another, we will depend on demeanor and natural gifts of people for function in the church. For example, some folks just come with the natural ability of oration. It would be easy to recognize this person as able to stand before the congregation and teach or preach. But without the spiritual giftedness this exercise would be powerless to bring sinners to Christ or to disciple new believers.

Let’s hurry along to our theme as it develops in the book of Acts.

God calls the persecutor to become the preacher.

Read [Acts 9:1-9](#).

The original does not say “breathing out.” Robertson makes this illuminating comment:

“Breathing threatening and slaughter (enpneōn apeilēs kai phonou). Present active participle of old and common verb. Not “breathing out,” but

"breathing in" (inhaling) as in Aeschylus and Plato or "breathing on" (from Homer on). The partitive genitive of apeilēs and phonou means that threatening and slaughter had come to be the very breath that Saul breathed, like a warhorse who sniffed the smell of battle. He breathed on the remaining disciples the murder that he had already breathed in from the death of the others. He exhaled what he inhaled." —Word Pictures in the New Testament

Saul lived this obsession of exterminating this sect later called Christians.⁴ It was here that God reached down and touched the life of Saul – the most unlikely person in that time was to become the defender of Christianity and the Great Missionary to the Gentiles.



Paul the Great missionary. I must say this that we cannot separate Paul from not only being the great defender and theologian of God’s word but we must never forget that Paul was the Great missionary. This was his life! Note again Robertson’s comment on *enpneōn apeilēs kai phonou* – breathing on... The picture of this intense breathing is so graphic and appropriate. Now that he was a missionary of the Gospel of Christ. He was totally committed – lived and breathed if you please carrying the Gospel of Christ to the untold masses. It was Paul who traveled countless miles sometimes through great peril in order that the Gospel be carried to the Gentile. The missionary effort was the overwhelming theme of Paul’s life. His letters were the result of oversight to the many churches that he himself was instrumental in founding in the first place.

The question is this: how did Saul the persecutor of the Gospel get to become Paul the purveyor of the Gospel (if I may use that alliteration). This would seem to be an impossible gulf to cross and indeed it was, short of the impact that the Gospel had not only on Saul but also the believers he was persecuting. The answer to this seemingly impossible question is this – the powerful effect of the Gospel changes lives including giving the recipient the ability to forgive those he could not forgive before Christ. It is not the result of an overwhelming argument won during a debate nor is it the result of shaming one into a radical change in behavior. Rather, it is the result of the Powerful Gospel⁵ changing the lives of men (and of course women). Let’s pick up this amazing account of Saul the persecutor becoming Paul the purveyor of the Gospel.

Saul Forgiven and Accepted by the Damascus Church.

⁸ And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man: but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And he was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink. Acts 9:8-9 (KJV)

⁴ See [Acts 11:26](#)

⁵ Again, I quote Romans 1:16.

We now pick up the account at the point of Saul's conversion. He had literally been struck down by the very Jesus whom he was trying to erase from history. J. W. Shepard makes telling commentary of this moment:

*"...The horrible fact of his persecuting the Risen Lord burst instantly upon his soul. 'What wouldst thou have me to do, Lord?' was the quick and repentant question of the now surrendered but erstwhile bold leader of the persecution. He saw the real Person of the Risen Christ and immediately capitulated to Him."*¹ endnote 6 footnote

So the effect was immediate. Saul was converted at this point – the evidence of this conversion was his willingness to obey the very Person he was out to eradicate from history's pages. In a way, the supposedly dead Jesus Christ immediately became the Risen, Alive Jesus Christ in Saul's life.

**The Power of Forgiveness and Acceptance in the Church.
Ananias – God's Messenger of Graciousness.⁷**

¹⁰ **Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."** Acts 9:10 (NASB95).

Ananias was targeted in a general way by Saul for imprisonment or even death.⁸ The original uses the disjunctive *de* rather than *kai* indicating a dramatic change of scene. NASB and others have it correct in the use of "now." I point this out to make a point – the Lord brings many things together in an exercise of His sovereignty regarding His redemptive plan. We are hardly ever aware of this but it is more than a literary device here to merely indicate a scene change (such as "meanwhile, back at the ranch") No. Our Lord is very much active in the affairs of men so that His purpose is fulfilled in the church. Here's what we have at this point. Saul has been struck down evidently at this point the rolling persecution has been stopped and I suppose that could have been the end of the story. But it is not. The Lord has much in store for Saul and He will not be thwarted in His plan to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. Look back for a moment to verses 5 and 6.

⁶ JW Shepard THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF ST. PAUL, page 63.

⁷ Ananias (Hananiah). Name common enough (cf. Acts 5:1 for another Ananias) and means "Jehovah is gracious." —Word Pictures in the New Testament

⁸ While Saul waited, blinded and fasting, thinking deeply about what had occurred, God was dealing with another man. The certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias was obviously not the same Ananias executed by God in chapter 5. Acts 22:12 describes him as "devout" and "well spoken of by all the Jews who lived" in Damascus. He was likely one of the spiritual leaders of the Damascus church. If so, he also, ironically, would have been one of Saul's main targets. —MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The

⁵ And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, ⁶ but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do." Acts 9:5-6 (NASB95).

This is Jesus Christ speaking to Saul. Oh? Jesus Christ has a plan for this murderer? Read on.

¹¹ And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." ¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; ¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; ¹⁶ for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." Acts 9:11-16 (NASB95)

So the very one who murdered the saints was to become the one who would bring the Name of Jesus Christ not only to the Gentiles but to kings *and* to the Jews. At this point things seem to be pretty much irresistible as far as what Ananias was to do but there is more to this story if I may skip ahead.

We all know the story of how Ananias did as he was commanded but the real “rest of the story” is this – Saul was accepted into the fellowship of the believers at Damascus.

¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; ¹⁹ and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." Acts 9:17-20 (NASB95)

It is clear from this passage Ananias addresses Saul as brother to indicate that Saul has been accepted – even forgiven at least by Ananias himself. Consider the culture in which this is happening. Revenge would be the order of the day. Saul was blind and helpless. Instead acceptance rules the situation. “Brother Saul,” indeed. This speaks so much to what has gone on in the heart of Saul and of Ananias. Now look at verse 19: ***“...Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus,”*** Saul was with his formerly intended victims as a brother in Christ. From this acceptance, redemptive history moves on to the beginning of an exciting chapter in missions – the rapid spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles, kings and to the Jews. All this because of the life-changing forgiveness that occurred in these early chapters of Saul’s Christian life.

Barnabas, Son of Consolation Intervenes in Saul's Behalf.

At this point we have an interval of 3 years. Saul did not immediately go to Jerusalem. Instead he escaped the plans of his former henchmen to kill him to Arabia. See [endnote 2](#) After three years it was time for Saul to meet his former enemy Peter and to fulfil his desire to fellowship with those at Jerusalem. This was not a trip to secure validation but it certainly was necessary in order for Saul to take the next step in his plans of being a missionary.

²⁶ **So he came to Jerusalem and made several attempts to associate with the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, being in doubt as to whether he himself was a disciple.** ²⁷ **Barnabas, however, came to his assistance. He brought Saul to the Apostles, and related to them how, on his journey, he had seen the Lord, and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had fearlessly taught in the name of Jesus.** Acts 9:26-27 (WEY)⁹

This could have been a serious rift between Saul and the apostles in Jerusalem but for the insightfulness and courage of Barnabas. The Message translation takes a bit of liberty in verse 9 by saying that Barnabas took Saul under his wing – perhaps it is a little liberty, but it certainly puts across the undertone of Barnabas' courageous act – Weymouth helps us understand the action too. Part of discipleship is this taking under one's wing others who may be facing difficulty especially when it comes to overcoming obstacles to ministry or growth *within the church*. It was certainly understandable that the church in Jerusalem particularly among the apostles that they were cautious but God saw to it that the obstacle was removed and that instrument was Barnabas.

The point to be taken here is that sometimes we need to take risks in ministry – not to suggest carelessness but that an interest on others and their personal journey with Christ necessitates commitment and time taken to look after the needs of others. We need to be interested in the needs of others especially when it comes to brothers and sisters in Christ.

⁹ I use the Weymouth translation here only because it more accurately gives the sense of the imperfect tense of the verb *epeirazen* – to join. “...*the imperfect tense of the verb translated was trying suggests that repeated attempts by Saul to join the fellowship were rebuffed.*”—MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The

Endnotes.

1. Lord (*kurie*). It is open to question if *kurie* should not here be translated "Sir" as in Acts 16:30 and in Matthew 21:29-30; John 5:7; John 12:21; John 20:15; and should be so in John 9:36. It is hardly likely that at this stage Saul recognized Jesus as Lord, though he does so greet him in Acts 22:10 "What shall I do, Lord?" Saul may have recognized the vision as from God as Cornelius says "Lord" in Acts 10:4. Saul surrendered instantly as Thomas did (John 20:28) and as little Samuel (1 Samuel 3:9). This surrender of the will to Christ was the conversion of Saul. He saw a real Person, the Risen Christ, to whom he surrendered his life. On this point he never wavered for a moment to the end. —Word Pictures in the New Testament

2. "When many days were fulfilled (*Hōs eplērounto hēmerai hikanai*). Imperfect passive indicative of *plēroō*, old and common verb, were in process of being fulfilled. How "many" (considerable, *hikanai*, common word for a long period) Luke does not say nor does he say that Saul spent all of this period in Damascus, as we know from Galatians 1:16-18 was not the case. Paul there states definitely that he went away from Damascus to Arabia and returned there before going back to Jerusalem and that the whole period was about "three years" which need not mean three full years, but at least portions of three. Most of the three years was probably spent in Arabia because of the two explosions in Damascus (before his departure and on his return) and because he was unknown in Jerusalem as a Christian on his arrival there."—Word Pictures in the New Testament

"In actuality, three years elapsed between verses 22 and 23. It is implied that Saul spent those years learning from the Lord in the kingdom of Nabatean Arabia. (This is an area not to be confused with the territory of modern Arabia, but located from nearby Damascus south to the Sinai peninsula. Some historians say that a colony of Nabateans lived in Damascus.)"—MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The