

The Great Stories of the Early Church
59-Paul and Silas 10
Those Whom God Commends
Acts 17:1-12

- 1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews:
- 2 And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures,
- 3 Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.
- 4 And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few.
- 5 But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.
- 6 And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also;
- 7 Whom Jason hath received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus.
- 8 And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things.
- 9 And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the other, they let them go.
- 10 And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews.
- 11 These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.
- 12 Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few. KJV

Introduction:

You will recall, I trust, where and when we are. Paul is on his second missionary journey having been sent out by the church at Antioch, Syria and Silas has come with him. Along the way they have picked up Timothy at Derbe and Luke, apparently at Troas. God had interrupted the ministry of Paul and Silas on the land mass we call Turkey and had sent them by a vision to Macedonia. They had begun their ministry in Europe at Philippi where we were introduced to Lydia and the Jailer (whose name we do not know). Because Paul had cast a demon out of a young woman there they had been driven out of Philippi and had come to Thessalonica where, as we saw last week, an extraordinary work had been done in the midst of great trials and resistance.

Moving on from Thessalonica, they had come to Berea where, like at Thessalonica, there was a synagogue of the Jews to which a number of believing Greeks attended with interest in the Jewish scriptures. We might also note that in order to get to Berea another city, Pella, was passed by.

Luke made an interesting statement concerning those who heard Paul and Silas as they taught in the synagogue at Berea, “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” These people were singled out by both Luke and the Holy Spirit Who was inspiring him to write and notice was taken of them in a unique and profound way.

The word Luke used was commonly used of noblemen or people of high rank. Now it is obvious that Luke did not have their standing in the world in his mind but their character, or disposition. He considered them in some sense a ‘cut above’ those people to whom they had just been ministering. We are left to wonder whether he was comparing them with the believers at Thessalonica or those who had opposed them there. But it is obvious that these seekers after truth were head and shoulders above the unbelievers so the only conclusion that we can draw is that he is actually comparing them to the believers they had just left behind.

This, then, creates other questions in our minds. Are there actual differences between believers with some being different in notable ways than others? If so, to what do we credit those differences? These are the ideas I was to explore with you in this message.

If there are such distinctions then we should have scriptural references and examples of that, should we not? The reality is that there are a number of them, too many for us to fully explore them all in this message but I do want you to notice many of them and then there is a reality about them that I want to bring to your attention in closing.

The First Example I want to notice is a sort of unique situation and will not be a part of our conclusion but I would be remiss not to mention it.

Matt 11:7-11

- 7 And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind?
- 8 But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.
- 9 But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet.
- 10 For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.
- 11 Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. KJV

Some really ridiculous things have been said about this statement of Jesus. What I am convinced He was saying was that only Himself (‘least’ or ‘later’ in the Kingdom of Heaven) was greater than John Baptist. This is really an extraordinary commendation but you see that the Lord does do that. He does recognize some saints as having a level of excellence that is greater than others.

This notion is established by the man hints in scripture that there will be a difference in the way

believers are rewarded at the Great Judgment.

Matt 19:28-30

- 28 And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.
- 29 And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.
- 30 But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first. KJV

Matt 5:11-12

- 11 Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.
- 12 Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. KJV

Rev 11:16-18

- 16 And the four and twenty elders, which sat before God on their seats, fell upon their faces, and worshipped God,
- 17 Saying, We give thee thanks, O Lord God Almighty, which art, and wast, and art to come; because thou hast taken to thee thy great power, and hast reigned.
- 18 And the nations were angry, and thy wrath is come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that thou shouldest give reward unto thy servants the prophets, and to the saints, and them that fear thy name, small and great; and shouldest destroy them which destroy the earth. KJV

There are also passages that indicate that there will be people who, though they do arrive safely in the New Earth, will have little or no reward because of their failures in their service to God here.

So, who can we look at for comparison?

Remember Nathanael?

John 1:47-49

- 47 Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!
- 48 Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.
- 49 Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel. KJV

Jesus took note of the fact that Nathanael (Bartholomew, the son of Tolmai) was a man of

unusual and remarkable integrity, a man in whom there was such honesty and such absence of falseness that the Lord of Heaven would pause to remark upon it.

Now, indeed, it is a universal characteristic of believers that they are honest people. No one can be dishonest as a matter of character and still be converted. We learn this from Paul in 1 Cor 6:9,10. But it seems that some of the people of God give themselves to honesty in a way that others do not and are notable for their absence of 'guile.'

Remember the Centurion at Capernaum?

Matt 8:5-10

- 5 And when Jesus was entered into Capernaum, there came unto him a centurion, beseeching him,
- 6 And saying, Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented.
- 7 And Jesus saith unto him, I will come and heal him.
- 8 The centurion answered and said, Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed.
- 9 For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it.
- 10 When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. KJV

Jesus, of course, knew the man's heart and fully understood the level of faith that he possessed. There were already many Israelites who believed on Him with true and saving faith but obviously this man outstripped them all in the *degree* to which he held absolute confidence in the Savior, so much so that Jesus remarked about it out loud.

Now please understand, Jesus did not exaggerate nor did He overstate any matter simply to make someone feel better about himself. If Jesus said that He had not found faith this great in any Israelite then we can rest assured. This man's faith was superior even to the other believers at that time.

Another interesting remark was made by Jesus concerning a non-Jewish person.

Matt 15:21-28

- 21 Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.
- 22 And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.
- 23 But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us.
- 24 But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.
- 25 Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.
- 26 But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it

- to dogs.
- 27 And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.
- 28 Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.
KJV

This woman expressed her confidence in the Lord Jesus by her perseverance and by her humility. It is a remarkable thing for a person to have such faith that the Lord Himself would said, “great is thy faith.”

Next we meet a scribe, one of those who was a teacher in the Jewish synagogue.

Mark 12:28-34

- 28 And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all?
- 29 And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:
- 30 And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.
- 31 And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.
- 32 And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he:
- 33 And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.
- 34 And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God. And no man after that durst ask him any question.
KJV

Here is a man who cannot yet be called a believer. He is not yet in the Kingdom of God, yet he is not like the majority of the other scribes who encountered Jesus. He was awake to the essence of God's Law and was very near coming to an encounter with his sins and with Jesus as his Only Hope, so close that even Jesus took notice, “Thou art not far from the Kingdom.” This meant that he was near to entering in, that the Holy Spirit was at work in his soul, that the gospel was just about to be revealed to him in its fullness.

The point is that he was different from the others and declared to be so by the Lord.

Then, there was that one leper among ten.

Luke 17:11-19

- 11 And it came to pass, as he went to Jerusalem, that he passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee.

- 12 And as he entered into a certain village, there met him ten men that were lepers, which stood afar off:
13 And they lifted up their voices, and said, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.
14 And when he saw them, he said unto them, Go shew yourselves unto the priests. And it came to pass, that, as they went, they were cleansed.
15 And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and with a loud voice glorified God,
16 And fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks: and he was a Samaritan.
17 And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine?
18 There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger.
19 And he said unto him, Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole. KJV

Notice that he was a ‘stranger’ which meant that he was not a Jew but was a person from another place or from another race. All ten were cleansed of their leprosy but only one was made whole. All apparently followed the command to shew themselves to the priest but only one saw that there was something more important than that. All 10 were joyous but only one gave glory to God. It is a sound presumption that the only converted man from that group was the ‘stranger’ who “with a loud voice glorified God.”

Jesus pointed out the difference between him and the others.

Next, we have a story of two sisters, both of whom loved Jesus and both of whom were loved by Him.

Luke 10:38-42

- 38 Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house.
39 And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word.
40 But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.
41 And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:
42 But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her. KJV

Both sisters were serving the Lord but one was doing a better job of it than the other. One was preparing a meal for Him while the other was feasting on what He was saying. “Mary hath chosen that good part,” He said to Martha, signifying that He more profoundly approved of Mary’s decision than Martha’s.

Here we see that even in the service of God one believer can excel another. All things are not equal.

Then, there is Peter who is usually remembered for his failure and not for his

commendation by the Lord.

We normally think about Peter being called out for his mouth and for his denials of Christ but there is another passage which hold high commendation for the man.

Matt 16:13-19

- 13 When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?
- 14 And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.
- 15 He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?
- 16 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.
- 17 And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.
- 18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.
- 19 And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. KJV

Regardless of what you think this passage means (and I am sure that it does not mean what the Catholic Church thinks it means), this is high praise and acknowledgment from the Lord for Peter. He was indeed different from the others and some of those differences were not good, but some were and his willingness to speak boldly of His faith in Christ was one of those differences. Remember also that he drew his sword to fight to the death for Christ when the Jews came to arrest him in the garden.

The reality is that all of us are a mixed bag, some things commendable and some not.

So, how is it that some of the Lord's people get called out and commended above others? How is it that some render service to God that is more noteworthy than others?

If we eliminate John Baptist as an exception, you should notice that every thing commended was something within the reach of every believer. These are not grand campaigns and huge buildings built or massive conversions or important books written. Men love those things and take note of them but the Lord noticed other things.

Nathanael was simply a man of unusual honesty and integrity. This is within everyone's reach. One need not be a scholar nor a genius nor even a leader of men or women in order to have a level of personal integrity before God that He would commend.

What was Nathanael doing under the fig tree that was a manifestation of integrity? I can only think of one thing, he was taking to heart the preaching of John and fully owning and confessing his sins before God, making a good and thorough work of repentance.

There are those mockers who say that a thorough work of repentance need not be done. I wonder if they long for the commendation of God? “Well done, good and faithful servant,” are words that they have decided to spurn? How far short can one come of excellence and still be saved? I don’t want to dance on the edge of that cliff, do you?

What about the Centurion who trusted Christ absolutely? Did he have anything magnificent about him other than his faith? Not that we are told. How much does one need to trust Christ so as to be commended for faith? I don’t know but **I am sure that one must make a full work of it**, pursue excellence in it and diligently cling to Him in dependence and prayer. How weak can faith be and still save? Some seem to be willing to test that, but none of us should be.

There is no way for us to measure our own faith objectively, so we will not know until the Judgment if it is commendable or not but I am sure of one thing. Those who are commended will be those who gave themselves in an absolute way to God, trusting Him to take care of them in every circumstance of life.

That, too, is within the reach of everyone, even children.

And, what was so spectacular about the Canaanite woman? What is there to commend her? All she had was a child with a need that only Jesus Christ could mend. Oh, that and a determination to be heard by Him and a complete confidence in Him that He could answer her prayer.

Her head was not clouded by any conception that she had ‘rights’ to the Savior or that her ‘faith’ merited her some unusual status. She was a sinner and knew that she was and, as a sinner, she was not ashamed to ask for the ‘crumbs’ which fell from the table He had prepared for others.

Such genuine humility and absolute faith never fails to catch the eye of the Son of God Who, in turn, relays the request to the Father with a reminder that the Son had taken away all of the guilt of the believing sinner and stands clothed in the righteousness of Christ Himself.

And, what about that scribe? He was from that group that Jesus often ridiculed and called out for their wicked behavior, assigning them the title, “hypocrites.”

Matt 23:13

13 But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in. KJV

What had this man done which distinguished him from the rest and caused the attention of the Savior to rest upon him? Somehow, by the enabling of God, he had become honest enough with himself and with God’s Word to see through the religious haze of his day, the endless kaleidoscope of opinions by the rabbis, public opinion as well as the scorn his caste felt for the Son of God to see that God’s requirements are very simple and easy to grasp.

- 32 And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he:
- 33 And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Oh, if one can only see and embrace the truth, conform his life to it in repentance, and embrace by faith the Work of the 'Master,' he can catch the eye of heaven and receive the salvation promised and acquired by the Savior. It is true that God must open his eyes but we read of a number in scripture whose eyes were opened who did not receive the truth that was shown to them.

Let us not forget one old leprous foreigner to Israel. What marvelous thing did he do? What incredible building did he erect? What marvelous book did he write? What amazing song did he compose? He came back to the One Who had healed him and worshiped God for the amazing gift he had been given. He was thankful, and because he was thankful he was not only healed but rendered every whit 'whole' in the eyes of God.

Thankfulness is highly valued in heaven. It is the currency upon which the city of God operates for it will be the endless occupation of those who are given the wisdom to be thankful on earth. And, thankfulness is something that anyone can offer to God.

What of the two sisters, Mary and Martha? They were both wonderful ladies, believers, heirs of all that was purchased in the Great Work of Jesus Christ. But Mary edged out her sister by giving more attention to spiritual matters than to carnal ones. Now, it is true that someone must do the mundane things of life.... but only *after* the Savior has been given His proper attention.

History tells us that Mary and Martha lived many years after that day, but how many of those days did Jesus sit, in the body, in their home? There were thousands of days to prepare food and fix the house but no days to sit eye to eye with the Savior. Mary was not lazy. She was spiritually diligent which caused her to put physical diligence in its proper place and, for that, she received the commendation of her Lord.

And, finally, there was Peter. Peter was indeed a man who failed. He failed Jesus in His earthly ministry by speaking out of turn. He failed Him at His trial by denying Him. He failed Him at Antioch by allowing himself to be drawn into error concerning the gospel. There is no question but that he failed. ***But the fact that he failed did not mean that he was a failure.***

There was something deep in that old fisherman, a resolve and a determination to serve Christ, which never burned out, no, not even when they led him, an old blind man, to his crucifixion. When it counted he stood fast and he left a lasting impression on the Christian Church.

This determination, too, is a grace that God is willing to dispense to those who are truly willing to suffer for His sake and seek His enabling to be faithful.

I have enumerated for you seven examples of people who were commended by the Lord. As I

said, we are leaving John Baptist to the side because of his unique role. But in each of the rest, commendation was given for something that is readily available and accessible to every child of God.

There is a difference that is going to be made among the children of God on the Last Day. Those who have sought the Lord for grace to be faithful and have persevered in that seeking until God enabled them to do so will be at the head of the line.

Those who have been lazy and indifferent, not caring enough to pursue the Lord, will be divided into two groups. One group will be cast away since their lack of interest betrayed an absence of faith and their religion was only a fraud.

The last group will actually be granted admittance on the basis of the Work of the Savior but without any mention of faithful labor.

1 Cor 3:13-15

13 Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is.

14 If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward.

15 If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. KJV

I don't know about you but I do not want to be found in that group.

So, now back to the church at Berea. What does it take as a child of God and a church member to draw the commendation of God? "they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." Again, a thing that requires no special talents...only willingness and diligence.