

The Cost of Christ-Centered Ministry Acts 9:19b-31

Main Point:

A (truly) Christ-centered ministry will be courageous, costly, and edifying for the church.

Introduction:

Good morning! Please open your bibles to Acts 8. If you are new to the Bible, you can find Acts 5 following the gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John).

What is source of sin?: wrongful desires (inverted desires)

Throughout history, Christians have debated what is the originating source of sin. When you boil it all down, where does sin actually come from, humanly speaking? Stemming from some of the early church fathers – St. Augustine in particular, and picked up again by other more recent thinkers (like C.S. Lewis), PRIDE (the attempt to live ones life apart from God or as if there is no need of God) has been identified as chief sin, the fountain out of which all sins flow. I think there is definitely some truth to that claim.

However, there is another definition of sin, one that stems from Jewish tradition and that can be confirmed in the bible itself, and that's what I will call *inverted desires*. God made us emotional people, with desires, appetites, longings, and such. These desires were designed by God to as extraverted, that is to be fulfilled outside of ourselves in relation to Him.

However, the heart of the temptation which both Adam and Eve faced in the Garden of Eden with the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil in Genesis 3 was to grasp something that was pleasing to the eyes and tasted very good, even though God forbade it. As you know from the way things turn out in Genesis 3, following through on their desires results in death and separation from God. From this point on in the biblical story (and human history!), we find the human creation which God had designed to find their deepest longings and desires to be fulfilled in Him, becomes ruled and governed by their own inverted desires. Paul refers to these inverted desires as “living according to the flesh”, where the satisfaction of human appetite and desire is the greatest objective. In Phil. 3:19, he says that such people have their “belly as their god.”

How inverted desires manifest themselves today in quest for significance

Now, lest we are tempted to think its just physical desires that are being referred to here, we need to take a closer look at how the *New Testament actually describes sin in terms of inverted desires being expressed through human attempts to find and be significant apart from God*. I'll say that again *New Testament actually describes sin in terms of inverted desires being expressed through human attempts to find and be significant apart from God*. Let me give you a couple of examples:

In Romans 1, Paul describes God giving people over to their own lustful desires, for they chose to worship the creation rather than the creator. And what are those lustful desires? Not just sexual, but relational: ²⁸ *And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.* ²⁹ *They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips,* ³⁰ *slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,* ³¹ *foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.* ³² *Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.*

In other words, human beings express their inverted desires are living for their own significance, with little regard for God! Again, listen to what James says in his epistle:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² *You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You*

do not have, because you do not ask. ³ *You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*

Finally, the Lord Jesus exposes the religious leaders of his day by showing how their religiosity is driven by an inverted desire for significance! When it comes to fasting, Jesus says:

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”² “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward...”⁵ “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

All of this is in line with first-century Jewish thinking, which suggests that the primal sin of humanity is not so much pride as it is *wrong desires*. And so, taking Jesus, Paul and James, and Jewish tradition together, we find that what drives people is a quest for their own significance, establishing their own identity, searching for fulfillment – and all of it apart from God. I want to offer some thoughts on how this quest for significance with inverted desires might manifest itself in our lives apart from Christ.

The Human Quest for Significance (apart from Christ):

- *Workaholicism* (I’m significant as long as I prove that I am working harder than everyone else)
- *Control/domination* (I’m significant as long as I have complete control over my environment and those around me)
- *People Pleasing* (I’m significant as long as I am loved and well-thought of by everyone around me)
- *Victimhood* (I’m significant as long as I remain unchallenged and everyone around me sympathizes with me about how difficult my life/circumstances are)

This morning, we are going to continue our time in Acts 9 and see how Saul of Tarsus, new convert to Jesus, begins his mission, and how the Lord Jesus begins to root out the sinful desires for significance from Saul’s life, in order to transform him into the servant, the witness, the missionary, he was called to be, and what this might teach us for today. Lets pray...

Orienting the Text: Where we are in the story

To recap where we are in Act 9, we have seen how Saul of Tarsus, a young, zealous Pharisee was given authority to seek out followers of Jesus, arresting them and putting them to trial (possibly executions). Luke describes Saul as a raging animal, a hungry wolf seeking out his next victim. So determined was Saul to stamp out this Jesus-movement that he seeks out official permission to go as far as Damascus to find and arrest Christians in that city (over a hundred miles away). However, along the way to Damascus, Jesus interrupts Saul’s journey, knocking him off his horse and blinding him with the light of His glory.

Last week we got further clarity on what the Lord Jesus planned for Saul through Ananias, whom Jesus directs to go and minister to Saul. Jesus tells Ananias the Saul is the chosen instrument to take the name of Jesus before kings, Gentiles, and the children of Israel. Ananias then comes to Saul, calls him “brother”, prays over him and Saul’s sight is regained, he is filled with the HS, and baptized. He now belongs to Jesus!

Today, we get see how Saul begins his ministry for the Lord Jesus...

Exposition of Acts 9:19b-31:

Saul preaches in Damascus

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Acts 9:19-25 - Scholars debate how long “some days” may have been, but the time before he goes to Jerusalem was roughly 3 years. Some of that time was spent in Arabia, when he would have disappeared for a season – some call this the “silent years” of Paul. Likely, this was a time when Paul would have been familiarizing himself with the teachings of Jesus, with exploring the OT scriptures in light of prophecy, even receiving revelation from Jesus himself (ala 2 Cor. 12).

But Luke doesn't give us much detail on this. Instead, he focuses on Paul's activity: what was he up to after he experiences his baptism and healing of his eyes? Luke says that he “immediately” (with urgency!) starts to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God. This would have been a claim that he formerly denied as a Pharisee, but now, having experienced Christ in the way he did, Paul says Jesus really is the Son of God, the Messiah. Luke also tells us that Paul grows in his capacity to preach (“strengthened”), inferring that this is by the power of the Spirit.

But as Jesus predicted, Saul's ministry would not be well received. His life is threatened and he is forced to leave.

Saul preaches in Jerusalem

Acts 9:26-30 - The next section is on his ministry in Jerusalem. Many were skeptical about him and took this man named Barnabas, who will become an important figure later on in the story, to bring the church along in accepting Paul.

Barnabas, a young disciple whose name means “son of encouragement”, advocates for Saul and gets him access to the church in Jerusalem. Barnabas will become a key figure later in the story when he and Paul begin their missionary journeys together. But here, at this critical point, God raises up another Ananias-type person who is willing to befriend Saul, despite the reservations they have due to his background.

Paul proves his worth by taking to the streets and synagogues, especially with the Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews). Paul may have had a unique ministry amongst them. However, trouble arises again and Paul is sent away to his home town in Tarsus.

The church thrives under persecution

Acts 9:31 - Despite the rocky start to Saul's ministry, Luke turns our attention to how the broader church is doing – and according to him, its doing just fine. Growing, thriving, and becoming all that God is calling it to be! I will say more on this verse next week as we return back to Peter (whom we haven't heard much from since chapter 5). But I want to reflect on what we see here in Saul, and what lessons we may draw from this narrative.

Main Point:

A (truly) Christ-centered ministry will be courageous, costly, and edifying for the church.

Breaking this down, faithful, fruitful service to Christ should be characterized by being...

- 1) Christ-centered (all about Jesus!)
- 2) Courageous (Spirit-enabled boldness)
- 3) Costly (suffering like Jesus)
- 4) Church-edifying (builds the body of Christ)

Application: The Cost of following Jesus for Paul...

I want to spend some more time reflecting on what it cost Saul, at this early stage, to devote himself to serving Jesus, and how the Lord begins to root out the inverted desires that had been driving Saul's life. Before he met the living Jesus Christ, what was Saul living for – really living for? What kept him going? Well, it was his Jewish faith yes, but what did his faith afford him? Privilege, status, wealth, respect. In short, what kept Saul

going is what previous generations referred to as the “applause of men” (this is true of the other Pharisees we run across in the New Testament). We might summarize it like this:

Saul’s life-motivation (before Jesus):

The significance of being someone significant.

Now Luke doesn’t give us specific information about what may have been happening in Saul’s heart/mind at this time, but other texts from his own letters might shed some light on his situation. Sometimes we can overlook the human element of our biblical heroes, and miss some of the rich lessons they have to teach us. So, lets reflect for a moment on what Luke has shared with us in light of what Paul shares in the inspired New Testament letters we have.

First, consider the power of Saul’s testimony

If you ever anyone needed compelling evidence that Jesus is real, and changes lives, its Saul, right? From rabid persecutor of the church, a Pharisee, despising Christians and all they stood for, and then suddenly, “poof!”, Saul claims to have seen Jesus personally, becomes a follower, and now risks his life preaching in His name. So again, his testimony alone should be enough to convince his fellow Pharisees and the Temple-leadership back in Jerusalem.

Second, consider the disappointing response he receives.

But that’s not what happens. Instead, as we’ll see, no one believes him and his life is continuously threatened. Now, there will be fruit in Paul’s ministry that we’ll see down the road in Acts 13. But the fruit is primarily Gentiles – not Jews! And, although Acts 13 is just a few pages away in our bibles, it was actually a period of years between his conversion and being sent out by the church in Antioch. So, there is a long, long time where Saul sees hardly any fruit in his ministry.

He goes from being the rising star in Jewish leadership circles, to being a complete and total reject (from his family, friends, etc.) and, with few exceptions, not quite fully accepted yet by his fellow believers. He had this incredible experience, this amazing call, and yet – at least at this early stage – experiences very little fruit in his ministry, and will continue to see little fruit for the next several years.

Furthermore, he has to continually prove himself to the disciples that he actually belongs. Throughout his ministry, there remains a cloud of suspicion around him (again, we see this in his letters where his gospel is always being questioned, not just by outsiders but insiders). In some respects, at least in these early days before Antioch in Acts 13, Saul becomes a spiritually-homeless person, not really fitting in anywhere.

Think about it:

- (Workaholism) Saul can no longer work or impress his former employers...
- (Control/Dominion) Saul has no one to control or dominate...
- (People-pleasing) Saul is not pleasing to anyone...
- (Victimhood) Saul has few (if any) sympathizers...

So what kept him going? How did he not become jaded, bitter, or disappointed, with God? With Jesus? How was he able to stay encouraged, still believe, even when the outward evidence was not really forthcoming? Well, I think the answer is very simple (and we glean this from his letters):

What sustained Saul after losing everything to follow and serve Jesus?

One simple thing: new (heart) desires shaped by the unfathomable love of Christ.

Listen to Paul’s own words later in Acts and other letters:

Acts 20:24 - *But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.*

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Acts 21:13 - *Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."*

Philippians 1:19-21 - *it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*

2 Corinthians 5:14-15 - ¹⁴ *For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.*

Do you see a pattern emerging in these texts? For him, knowing the Lord Jesus, being united and in communion with the Lord Jesus, was worth every sacrifice, hardship, and endeavor. When you boil the Christian life down to its very essence, its utter simplicity, its really this: love God/Jesus, and love/others in His name; and we love Him, because He first loved us. The only real motivation Paul has – given everything he’s lost due to becoming a follower of Jesus – is simply this: a heart-level desire to please the Lord Jesus, and help others know Him too, no matter what the cost might be. This is the work the Spirit of God does in our lives drawing us into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

What about you, my friend?

So, my friend, what is sustaining and motivating you today? What gets you out of bed and keeps you going through the day, and gives you motivation and sustains you to do it all over again the following day?

For the ones following Jesus...

For those of us who are seeking to follow Jesus this morning, if the fuel in our heart and soul is something other than the incomprehensible love of Christ, and a Spirit-wrought desire to please and serve Him, then we are falling prey to the fleshly tendencies to find significance according to our own inverted, sinful desires. And in doing so, friends, we are in danger of missing out on the hope and the spiritual riches which the gospel offers us. If the Lord is taking you through a Saul-like season in which you aren’t seeing a lot of the fruit that you want to see in your efforts, it may be that He is stripping away those inverted desires that cause so many disruptions in our lives and relationships. If this is you today, cling more tightly to Jesus, and let Him do His sanctifying work in your marriage, your vocation, your ministry, relationships, and your life! The Lord is healing you, and redirecting you away from the broken cisterns of wrong desire and pulling you towards the well-spring of eternal life.

Paul says in Rom. 5:5 that hope in Jesus does not disappoint us or put us to shame. Why? Because the love of God has been abundantly poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, which has been given to us. Later in Romans, Paul prays later in Rom. 15 the “God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” This is what is offered to us today, friends! Don’t sell yourself short in taking full advantage of what your God-given privileges of being a blood-bought, grace-received, Spirit-filled member of Christ’s body! You belong to Him – and He is now yours...

For the ones not following Jesus...

And for any of you here, who aren’t yet following Jesus, and you are still seeking significance for your life is something other than what God has designed for you in Jesus Christ – know this, you are seeking to draw life’s waters from a broken cistern, a dried up well, that offers you nothing. You are seeking significance and trying to make life work by living out of inverted desires – made for God! – but in the end, leaving you empty, frustrated, and destitute. Friend, all your attempts at achievement, success, control, significance – its all chasing after an illusion; an illusion which will not only disappoint, but one that keeps you from the life that the Lord Jesus is offering to you – both now, and eternity. Going back to Paul’s writings in Romans, he describes the wages of sin, the results of sin, the ways of sin (that is, living for our selves and our own significance apart from Him), as the way of death. Only in Jesus Christ, will life ultimately make sense, have purpose, and fill the vacancies of your soul. Only Jesus Christ can save you from the disordered desires of your heart; desires that will ultimately

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condemn you and result in a Christ-less eternity. That's ultimately what "hell" is – it's the total and complete absence of God, of Jesus, where we are left with our own desires in a place of torment. Some scholars suggest that "hell" is the complete and total outworking of the dehumanization process that Paul describes in Rom. 1, where everything deteriorates within us and around us.

Commenting on this, Joe Rigney, a scholar who wrote a book on C.S. Lewis, describes how Lewis imagines what hell is like. He says:

Hell is an everlasting ruin, a decay, crumbling, retreating into yourself, a loss of all rationality and joy, a plunging into misery. But, it's a self-plunging. It's a gnawing and an ache, but it's oriented inward, downward into the abyss. It is, in one sense, the opposite of heaven. Heaven is this ever-increasing, further up, further into joy, into God, into life. Hell is the opposite of that. It's an everlasting movement away from God.

Friend, hear me today: I want you to be changed by what Saul was changed by, what countless people throughout history have been changed by, what many in this room have been changed by, by what I have been changed by: the unfathomable love of Christ, a love which not only sustains us in the darkest seasons of life, but a love which has the power to transform our inverted desires into something holy and pure, and our guides our futile attempts at finding significance towards SOMEONE who is good, true, and beautiful – the living Jesus Christ. If you want to talk more about this or have questions, I hope we can talk sometime soon. Let's pray...

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Application:

Faithful ministry to the Lord should be...

- 1) Christ-centered (all about Jesus!)
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Life Group Questions:

- 1) How does Luke describe Saul's ministry? What were his main priorities? What can the church today learn from Saul?
- 2) What did Saul's conversion/ministry "cost" him in terms of his relationships, identity and community? What kept him going despite the cost of following Jesus?
- 3) How do we see the church coming alongside Saul in the midst of being persecuted?
- 4) What lessons does this narrative teach us about witnessing for Jesus in today's culture?