

## I Know You Are, But What Am I?

### 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

The Apostle Paul—also known as St. Paul—is credited with having written more of the New Testament Books of the Bible than anyone else.

His writings give us the most enlightened interpretation of the meaning of Christ's life, death and resurrection.

His teachings do more than anyone else to help us to understand how the church should function if it is to reflect the love and justice of Jesus in the world.

In the passage we read this morning from Paul's First Epistle to the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth, he gives a concise reminder of the salvation that is possible through what Jesus has done for us:

"I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn *received*, in which also you *stand*, through which also you are *being saved*.

For I handed on to *you* as of first importance what *I* in turn had received:

that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures."

Paul was personally responsible for spreading that Good News, for converting others to a faith in Jesus and for starting new churches wherever he went.

He did these things often at great risk to himself, and ultimately at the cost of his own life.

But despite all the great contributions that Paul made for the benefit of his own and future generations of Christians, it is something else that Paul says in this passage that really gives me pause. It is where Paul writes, "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle."

Now, an Apostle is by definition someone who delivers a message. Nobody ever did more to spread the message of what it means to be a Christian than Paul. Yet, he calls himself "least among all the apostles", and "unfit" to bear that label!

Do you remember in childhood, maybe on a playground, when someone put you down?

You might have come back with something like, "I know you are, but what am I?"

Well, when Paul insists that he is unfit to be called an apostle—I want to come back with something like, "If *you* are unfit to be an apostle, then what am *I*?"

If *Paul* claims to be the least of all the apostles, then what chance do *I*, or *any of us* have of faithfully and productively serving Christ with our lives?

A clue to the answer for those questions can be found in the last part of that verse. “For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, ... **because I persecuted the church of God.**”

Saint Paul, you see, had not always been such a saint.

His very first reaction to the message being spread about Jesus by Jesus’ disciples was not to embrace it, but to do everything he could to stamp it out.

He violently persecuted those early apostles as dangerous heretics because he believed in his heart that that was what God would have him do.

It wasn’t until Paul was on a mission to arrest Christians that he was suddenly blinded by a light and heard the voice of Jesus calling him, that he became the Paul we know.

But, Paul never let himself forget who he had been and what he was capable of before his transformation.

And because he put it down in writing in a letter to the Corinthians—a letter which we still read today—he wasn’t going to let anyone else forget it either.

Neither did he let it go unsaid what it was that changed the staunch enemy of the Church that he had been, into the champion for Christ that he had become.

In the next verse of his Epistle he wrote, “But by the grace of God I am what I am.”

It was the action of God’s grace—God’s unconditional love and God’s transformative power to redeem lives—displayed beyond a shadow of a doubt in the complete turnaround of Paul’s life—that lent an undeniable authenticity and an indisputable credibility to the words his lips proclaimed.

There is an expression that Paul uses twice in this passage.

“In vain.” In vain literally means not succeeding in attaining an intended outcome.

The first place he applies this expression is in a warning against “believing in vain.”

His concern for the Corinthian Christians was that their believing that Jesus died and was resurrected for their sins, was not producing the outcome of a visible spiritual vitality among them.

The other place where he uses the term “in vain” is in reference to himself.

After reminding them of his being unsuited to be an apostle because he had once actively persecuted Christians, he says,

“But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and God’s grace to me has not been in vain.”

Paul holds himself up as a model to the Corinthians of how amazing God’s grace can be!

That grace can transform the most resistant of people into God's agents of change in the world.

A Galilean fisherman named Simon, at first doubted, and then only reluctantly accepted Jesus' invitation to let down his nets for a great catch of fish.

When he saw the result, he was positive that he was too sinful of a man to do the greater things that Jesus would call him to do.

Today we know that "sinful man" by the name of Saint Peter.

John Newton was a slave trader, trafficking in human lives.

Then God's grace took hold of his heart and steered his life in a new direction. He became an Anglican minister and an abolitionist.

He wanted his personal encounter with God's grace to be an example to others who were living their lives in vain with respect to God's purpose for them, as he had once done.

The result was the hymn, "Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound."

When it comes to God's will for us, most of us fall somewhere in between slave traders and saints on the spectrum of living by faith or living in vain.

But the issue is not whether God is calling you to some form of ministry; the only question is what kind of ministry God has planned for you.

And whether you will answer the call.

You may think that you have nothing to offer God and that you are less qualified or less spiritual than a million other people that God could call upon.

If you do, you may be missing an invitation that God is placing in front of you.

And you may be depriving the world of something no one but you can provide.

So, may you recognize the moments when God comes calling on you for some form of service.

A service for which you are certain you are the wrong choice, but for which God knows better.

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