

## “On Being A Good Character Witness”

Acts 9:26-31

(fourth of four)

Tenth Sunday Morning After Pentecost, August 8, 2004

Have you ever been asked to vouch for someone or to give someone a recommendation? I once heard of a man who was asked to give a recommendation for someone who had applied for a job. He didn't really feel confident about recommending him, but he didn't want to damage the person's chances of getting the job. He solved his dilemma in a novel way. His response was simple: "When you have known John as long as I've known him, you will feel about him exactly as I feel about him." I wonder if John got the job? All of us have been in situations where we've needed someone to speak a good word for us. Everybody needs a good character witness and it's great to have friends who are willing to do that.

Barnabas was a good character witness. That's what the scripture in Acts 9:26-31 indicates that Anthony read. Barnabas vouched for Saul who certainly needed someone to vouch for him. As I consider the life of Barnabas I really believe that being a good character witness was something he did consistently. He is first mentioned in Acts 4:32-37 and then is mentioned 22 other times in this chronicle of the early church's progress called Acts. In the third century, Clement of Alexandria identified Barnabas as one of the 70 Jesus sent on a mission trip. The story is told in Luke 10.

What Barnabas did for Saul, who became Paul, is something that he probably did for most of the disciples. Paul really did need a good character witness since the disciples in Jerusalem were afraid. They were suspicious of whether public enemy number one was genuine.

Now before we are too harsh in our judgment of those frightened believers, we should ask ourselves what we would have done in their circumstances. Some of them probably had relatives and friends who had been arrested and perhaps killed due to the fanatical zeal of Paul. It is not difficult to understand why those believers were afraid of him. They might have believed that his claim to be a disciple was only a cruel hoax, designed to create more suffering for them. No doubt, this rejection was deeply hurtful to Paul. Anyone whose motives have ever been misunderstood can sense a little of his pain.

This is where Barnabas, The Encourager, stepped in to help. How did Barnabas know about Paul's conversion? How could he be certain of Paul's sincerity? We have no answers to these questions. The record of what Barnabas did is written in Acts 9. ***“Then Barnabas came to his help and took him to the apostles. He explained to them how Saul had seen the Lord on the road and that the Lord had spoken to him. He also told them how boldly Saul had preached in the name of Jesus in Damascus”*** (v. 27). The disciples in Jerusalem accepted Paul as a brother on the word of Barnabas. Apparently “The Encourager” was so loved and respected that his judgment concerning Paul was accepted without question.

Pause and think for a moment about this incident from the early Christian experience of Paul. Paul was destined to become a great witness for Jesus Christ – perhaps one of the greatest in all of Christian history. He would evangelize in different parts of the world. He would write timeless letters that would become two-thirds of our New Testament.

Behind all of the accomplishments of this apostle lie the magnificent ability and willingness of Barnabas to be a good character witness. Barnabas could have been cynical about Paul. He could have taken a “wait-and-see” attitude toward him, but that was not the character of Barnabas. He believed that Jesus had changed Paul and that Paul was sincere to the very heart. Because Barnabas looked for and saw the best in Paul, the arms of the believers in Jerusalem were opened. Paul was received as a brother.

Who taught Barnabas to look for the best in other people? Who taught him how to be a good judge of character? Some might answer that Barnabas was just naturally that type of person. I'm sure he was. There's more to it than that. Remember, everything we know about Barnabas teaches us that he was a sincere,

from-the-heart follower of Jesus. Barnabas might have been a kind and gentle person by nature, but that was reinforced by what he learned from Jesus concerning how to look at people.

In a world too often characterized by cynicism and mistrust, there is a profound need for people who are able and willing to be good character witnesses. Barnabas certainly had that ability and he was willing. He recognized in this fellow from Tarsus what others did not look deeply enough to see. Barnabas was really demonstrating a Jesus-like attitude toward Paul. He had learned well from the example of His Master as a result of his own turn around moment.

What of us? How do we look at people? Are we able to look for the best? Are we able to be good character witnesses? Or do we have a critical, cynical attitude toward others? Everybody needs a good character witness and you and I are to be such witnesses. How can we be one? Let's consider a couple of necessary ingredients for being a good character witness. Looking at them may result in some turn-around moments for all of us.

If we are going to be good character witnesses, it is vital for us to, first, walk away from our prejudices and preconceived ideas about people. Everybody thought Paul wasn't sincere about the change that came in his life. I mean he is the one who was prejudice. He is the one who had preconceived ideas about The Way. It's always the other person, isn't it? It's somebody else's prejudice and preconceived ideas. Each of us is guilty of maintaining prejudices and preconceived ideas. And as long as we place people in categories, we will have a difficult time being good character witnesses. It becomes difficult to find anything good in some of them.

When the ministry of Jesus was in its early days, He gathered the group of men who would be His friends and co-workers. One of those early disciples was Philip. The story is related in John 1. When Philip decided to accept Jesus' invitation and follow Him, he was so excited that he contacted a man name Nathanael and exclaimed, ***“We have found the one whom Moses wrote about in the book of the Law and whom the prophets also wrote about. He is Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth”*** (v. 45). Nathanael's cynical response was: ***“Can anything good come from Nazareth?”*** (v. 46). Nathanael was from Cana, about eight miles from Nazareth. Nazareth had a bad reputation. It was a trade center, and it attracted some very undesirable people. Apparently, Nathanael had been taught that people from Nazareth were low class. Nothing good could come from Nazareth, certainly not the promised Messiah.

Before we are too harsh in our judgment of Nathanael, we need to take a closer look at our own attitudes toward certain groups of people. It is impossible for us to be good character witnesses if our prejudice has so blinded us that we have already made up our minds about them.

I was told that Sam Jones was one of the roughest characters in a previous community where I served as pastor. Nobody wanted to associate with him. He had tattoos and scars from fights. A few teeth had been knocked out. There were a couple of people who had witnessed to Sam. He was so resistant. But one day, as a result of the witness of those faithful people who genuinely cared and who were willing to take a risk, Sam found Jesus. He asked Him into his heart. The light really shined on him. A genuine turn-around moment had occurred. I was unaware of what had happened in Sam's life.

On the Sunday morning following Sam's turn-around moment, during the response time, he stepped out and began walking down the aisle. He was mean-looking. He was like, I: he never smiled or thought he was when he wasn't. I must confess that the fear of God ran through my veins for I wondered what the meanest man in town was doing coming down the aisle. I even wondered what he was doing in church! When he got to me, I looked up at him – he was well over six feet and must have weighted 275 pounds and it was all muscle – and he looked down at me. A smile came across his face displaying those places where teeth had been removed via somebody's fist. He said, “Little preacher, I met Jesus last week and they tell me I need to get baptized and I want to get baptized here.” I wasn't about to tell Sam he couldn't get baptized for various reasons. That was one of the most joyous days of my life and it was joyous for others as well.

But some of the more cautious brothers and sisters weren't real sure about this. A couple of deacons didn't think it appropriate for Sam to be baptized in "our" baptistery. I had a turn-around moment when I heard that and had a few words with those men, who, likewise, had turn-around moments, even if they didn't want to turn around. Sam walked down in the baptistery on the appointed day. He was a big dude. The baptistery was shallow. I looked at him, telling him I gladly baptize him in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then I remembered something Calvin Miller uttered in his mind when he found himself in a similar situation: "And may God have mercy on my soul." Before I could get my arm on Sam and take him back in the water, he said aloud, "Little preacher, I'm too big for you to baptize so I'm going to help you." At that point, Sam just fell back in that shallow water. It was like the sinking of the Titanic. Sam's body dispersed water all over me. It spilled over the glass into the choir. Those folks were re-baptized with a sprinkling that momentarily made each of them an Episcopalian. It was a grand and funny moment. It was also deeply spiritual.

Immediately some of us began vouching for Sam. He was genuine. It took a while, but the church and community came around. They had seen a genuine turn around in Sam's life. All of us had some turn around moments. We put aside our prejudices and preconceived ideas about Sam.

Perhaps that is what Barnabas did. He came to see that Paul was for real. Eventually the believers in Jerusalem came to see the same thing. Don't forget that there are a lot of Sams and Sallies right here in Carrollton who need us to move beyond those prejudices and preconceived notions.

Santa Fe, New Mexico is located in an area rich in history. Among other things, Santa Fe and the surrounding areas are home to large numbers of American Indians. These people were living in the Southwest long before Caucasians came. I am told there is a monument in the center of the plaza in Santa Fe to commemorate those who died in wars with the Indians who inhabited the area. The words carved on the marker used to read: "*To the heroes who have fallen in the various battles with savage Indians in the territory of New Mexico.*"

Can you understand how offensive this was to the Indian population of the area? How would you react if your ancestors had been driven off the land that was theirs and called "*savages*" because they fought for what belonged to them? The monument reads a little differently now. The word "*savage*" has literally been chiseled off the stone. With that word gone the monument now reads: "*To the heroes who have fallen in the various battles with Indians in the territory of New Mexico.*" Hopefully, we are learning that a person who happens to be an Indian is a person with feelings, dignity, needs, and the ability to make a contribution - not a *savage*.

Barnabas may have considered Paul to be a savage. He was convicted and experienced a turn around moment in his own life that enabled him to willingly to move beyond his prejudice about Paul. We are able too. The question is are we willing?

A second quality we are to cultivate if we are to be good character witnesses is a firm belief that people really can change. Unless we believe that change is possible, it will be impossible for us to see the best in some people.

Barnabas believed that Paul had changed, even though he knew all about his recent past. He knew full well that Paul had been angry and fierce in his battle against Jesus and His people. He also was aware that his fellow believers had every reason to be afraid of Paul. But Barnabas believed that Paul had been changed by his encounter with Jesus. Now, Paul was a different person, ready to serve Jesus and wanting to be a part of His people. In this context Barnabas looked for and saw the best in Paul and dared to stand up for him.

Jesus also believed that people could change. He took time to care for a lot of unlikely people. Many of these people had been written off by the religious establishment of the time. He cared for and redeemed an assortment of tax collectors, merchants, fishermen, and women who had no status in society. Jesus cared for these people because they were human persons with feelings and a need to be loved. But there

is more to it than that. Jesus looked at these people as they were and saw what they had the potential to become. He believed that people could grow and change. He was able to be a good judge of character and even be a character witness for many folks.

I often think about the twelve men Jesus chose to be His closest followers. They were a pretty unpromising group. Some were rough and smelly fisherman; some had quick tempers. One was a tax collector. Not one of them was in the good graces of the religious establishment.

Suppose Jesus had appointed you to serve on the “Disciple and Apostle Selection Committee.” Would you have voted for any of the men He chose? Why did Jesus pick these men? Because He saw qualities in them of which no one was aware. Jesus knew these men could change and become all He intended them to be.

The possibility of change is uniquely human. Change is often difficult, but it is always possible by the grace of God. This fact, that with God's forgiveness and help people can change, should cause us to want to be good character witnesses.

Some years ago, Ken Chafin invited me to be part of a panel discussion on preaching at Georgetown College, a fine Baptist institution in Georgetown, Kentucky. During the discussion, someone in the audience asked me if I believed what I was preaching and if people really could change as a result of preaching. I answered “Yes” to both questions. Then I said, “I have to believe what I’m preaching and that people really can change as a result of preaching. If I didn’t believe that, I don’t think I could get up and preach week after week.” I saw a smile come across Ken’s face. When he brought the discussion to a conclusion, he came and stood behind me, placing his hands on my shoulders and telling all gathered in the auditorium that what I had said, about believing people can change and that I believed what I preached, had encapsulated the whole discussion. He augmented my remarks by saying, “We have to believe that people can change and preaching helps change come about. We have to believe that people can change.” I was humbled.

Let us allow the Holy Spirit to turn us around and really believe that people can change. And when people do change, let’s vouch for them by being a good character witness for them. Let’s do that and we’ll experience what “*the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria (v. 31a)*” experienced. The church “*had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers*”(v. 31b). I’ll gladly vouch for that. How about you?

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**All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from The New Revised Standard Version, 1989.**