

Second Chances: 4. Driven
Luke 18:18-23
January 29, 2017
Pastor Steve Richards

Every one of us has a primary driver or motivation in life. What's your driver?

Daisy is our brown short haired dog that we rescued 11 years ago – and what we've learned is that she will do anything for food, especially if it's people food. Her favorite is chicken. Her least favorite thing is getting her nails trimmed, but if she's being fed chicken she hardly realizes her nails are being trimmed. Her driver is food. What's yours? Some say it's genetic, others think it's nurtured in us. Maybe it's work, a need to be loved and appreciated, a desire to win, or maybe it's acquiring more money and more possessions. What drives you? We don't always know what it is.

Last fall, I received an email promotion for a book by Ian Cron that included a self-test for the enneagram. It is a profile which helps us understand ourselves using nine different personality types. Maybe you've taken it or another profile like Myers-Briggs or DISC. So, I answered the questions, and I was scored as a type 3. Here's what it says about type 3: *adaptable, excelling, inner-directed, authentic, modest and charitable, fullness of heart, gentle and benevolent*. And when I read that I thought, "Yeah, I like that! I'm a type 3." But then I read a little further and there's a shadow side to type 3 that tends to surface in times of extreme stress: *vindictive, relentless, untrustworthy, devious, deceptive, psychopathic behavior and narcissistic tendencies*. And suddenly, I thought, I don't want to be a type 3. Maybe there's another type that I'll like better! The purpose of such tests is to help us become more self-aware and how to build on our strengths, but there's always a shadow side and if we're not healthy or not aware we can slip into the shadow side. It's important to know who we are and what makes us tick on the inside. Again, let me ask: What is your primary driver?

Today, we have two different stories of men who encountered Jesus. They both were very successful, but they had the wrong driver. The first is the story of the rich young ruler. Luke doesn't tell us what kind of ruler he was – whether he the ruler of a synagogue or a city or part of the Jewish council of the 70, known as the Sanhedrin. But he tells us the man was wealthy. He had achieved a certain level of success – and early, because he was young. But on the inside something was missing. He had prestige, possessions, power and wealth but that wasn't enough. It turns out that he's been listening to Jesus, this Jewish carpenter and teacher from the tiny, Podunk village of Nazareth. Jesus has something he doesn't have. Mark's gospel tells us the **man ran up to Jesus and fell on his knees before him**. If he's a ruler and everybody who knew him knows he's successful – he's what everyone wants to be – and they see him run up to Jesus, they must be thinking – there's something we're not seeing. He's struggling with something. And this rich young ruler asks: **"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"** He's not asking how do I get to heaven, but what do I have to do to please God? He's the ruler and the leader and yet he doesn't know. And Mark tells us: **Jesus looked at him and loved him**. We know Jesus loves everybody, but Mark wants us to see how Jesus is responding to this man. "What must I do?" he's asking. He's pleading. And Jesus lists several of the commandments and the man replies, "I've done that. I've always obeyed the law. I didn't kill anyone, didn't commit adultery, didn't steal, didn't lie, and I honor my parents. Is there anything else? Because I'm empty inside." Jesus says, There is one more thing. **You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me**. And that's where the story gets troublesome – and not just for the rich young

ruler. None of us want to hear this – that Jesus might require this of us – sell everything and give it away. We're not going to do that. And if that's what's required, then we all are in trouble.

This is the only time that we know of that Jesus says this to anyone. Remember, Jesus is trying to help this man understand what's wrong – and what's wrong is that despite being a ruler and being wealthy; being a leader who has kept all the commandments, he has the wrong driver at the center of his life. And what Jesus knows is when money is at the center, it controls us. Earlier in chapter 16, Jesus teaches, *"You cannot serve God and money. Either you will hate one and love the other or despise one and be devoted to the other."* And this man was trying to do both, and it wasn't working. Maybe you remember the parable when Jesus said a man had a bumper crop of grain and wondered what to do with all the excess. So, he built bigger barns to store it all, but then he died and all his barns were full of grain that began to rot. And Jesus says, he was a fool! Because he was only concerned about himself. He had the wrong driver. In his sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, don't be concerned about what you will eat or what you will drink or what you will wear – but seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well. (Mt 6:33) What's at the center of your life? Something is not right in the ruler's heart, so Jesus says, go, sell and give it all away.

But does Jesus mean that? Maybe it's a test? Like the time God tested Abraham. Abraham and Sarah had been waiting for a child and finally Isaac was born. And God said now take your son up the mountain and sacrifice him like the pagans do to their gods. And Abraham takes Isaac up the mountain. He's actually going to do it! And at the last minute God says, that's enough – don't do it. I just wanted to see if you would. I wanted to see if you would listen to me – if you would follow me. And here's what the rich young ruler did: **he became very sad, because he was very wealthy.** What's he do? He walks away. He would not even entertain the thought of it. He's offered a second chance. He could put something else at the center of his life, something that would fill the emptiness inside, but he wouldn't or he couldn't. And Jesus says, "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God." Hearing that, the disciples just throw up their hands – really, Jesus? You mean that? then nobody gets into the Kingdom of God! And Jesus says, **What's impossible with human beings is possible with God.** Will you trust God on this? Grace works.

I've wondered what I would do if Jesus told me to do what he told this man. And to believe it was Jesus, I would need Jesus standing right here in the flesh. I'd need to see the scars in his hands and his feet – and I'd need a guarantee maybe even notarized that there was a plan to take care of me. Because how am I going to pay the medical bills and who will support us when we can't work anymore? And I like taking vacations. I want to be able to visit our children. And I'm not ready to give up my Mustang... and I like having an iPhone and a television and a whole lot of other things. But if Jesus was right here (and I think it would have to be in front of all of you – how would I explain this to Amanda if I don't have witnesses) But if I knew it was Jesus, I'd like to think I could do it. But I don't know... What is it that drives us? Money is so deceptive and the quest for more. We want bigger and better and there's so much within reach and we're willing to work for it. Even if it means working 6 or 7 days a week, responding to emails and text messages all hours of the nights and no vacations, if that's what it takes - then so be it. But then I think of the father who came to me years ago, asking me to tell him about his teenaged daughter, because his work had taken over his life and he had missed out on a relationship with his only daughter. That's the ruler. He missed it. He had a second chance. He could have followed Jesus. You can't buy that – "follow me". And he just walked away.

In Luke 5:27, we find the story of another man, also very wealthy and in a different kind of position of power. **Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his**

tax booth. “Follow me”, Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. The Romans auctioned off the right to collect taxes, and Levi bought that right. He was responsible to send the Roman government an agreed amount but anything he could raise over and above that he was allowed to keep as his commission. As you might guess, the tax system was filled with abuse. No one knew how much to pay, and they had no choice but to pay whatever the tax collector wanted. Tax collectors became very wealthy and with their wealth came power and the ability to buy whatever influence they wanted. Because once you had this position, you weren't about to give it up. And consequently they were hated by the people. By Jewish law, they could not enter a synagogue. The Jews grouped them together with murderers and robbers. The last person anyone wanted to see as the recipient of grace and mercy was Levi. “Who cares whether he's feeling empty inside? Let him suffer.” But all it took were two words from Jesus – and Levi left everything. He lost his income but he found a destiny. He lost his income but he found a greater purpose. He lost financial security but he found peace, joy, and contentment surpassing anything his wealth could provide.

It was a second chance. Jesus was saying, I can use you, and I want to change your drive. I don't want to take away your ambition, but I want to change it so God is at the center of your life.

Is there a second chance for people who have done horrible things? What about people who have been incarcerated? I remember a member of our congregation who had rental property had received an application from someone who had just been released from prison and he was struggling with whether to accept the application. He wanted to give the man a chance but he was also afraid of what the neighbors would say when they realized a felon was moving in next door. As President Obama's term came to an end, he pardoned nearly two thousand people. What made the news were questions about whether a particular person deserved to be pardoned, but what caught my attention was the story of Serena Nunn. She received news of her presidential pardon from her lawyer, and she said, “I feel so blessed.” She was 19 when she was caught dealing drugs with her boyfriend. She was not innocent. She was in love and when her boyfriend told her to do it, she went along, not thinking of the consequences. And she received a 15 year sentence. When she was 31, President Clinton commuted her sentence to time served, and she was released from prison. She finished college and with character references from Clinton and the judge who sentenced her, she was admitted to law school – and graduated with her law degree. Today, she works in the public defender's office but her conviction of a felony prevented her from admission to the Georgia State Bar. Obama's pardon now makes that possible. She has been given a second chance two times over. She says, “I want to help people the way I was helped.”

If we believe in redemption and nobody will give you a second chance, how do you move forward with life? Levi would become Matthew – a name that means “gift of the Lord” and though the Bible doesn't tell us about the rest of his life, since early times the Christian community has remembered him as a martyr, having given his life for the One who gave him life that day at his tax booth.

My hope in this series is that we could see ourselves. A woman married and divorced five times – she's given a second chance. A man that today we would identify as mentally ill and Jesus traveled through a raging storm to keep an appointment with him. He's given a second chance. A woman forced into prostitution – she's given a second chance. No one is beyond hope. God is the God of second chances.

How could I not use this photo today? [opening photo from Mary Tyler Moore show] In the show, she was Mary Richards – I always liked that name! And when she tossed her hat into the air, it

was her fresh start, the exhilaration of having moved to Minneapolis and getting a second chance. Every morning we get that, and every night, I have to confess, Lord I didn't follow you completely. But then the sun comes up the next morning, and there's another fresh start if I choose to accept it. The Christian life is this path of continually striving to let Jesus be the center of all we say and think and do. And my hope and prayer for us all is that we don't walk away, but come alongside each other in this journey of grace and love giving each other another chance just as God through Christ does for each of us.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of January 29, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Lord Jesus, we want to follow you. And yet, we've all done plenty of things that disappointed you and hurt others. Thank you for showing us mercy, helping us to change and calling us into your service. Amen.

Monday, January 30

Scripture: Matthew 6:19-24, Luke 16:10-15

"Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

"The eye is the lamp of the body. Therefore, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how terrible that darkness will be! No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

"Whoever is faithful with little is also faithful with much, and the one who is dishonest with little is also dishonest with much. If you haven't been faithful with worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? If you haven't been faithful with someone else's property, who will give you your own? No household servant can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

The Pharisees, who were money-lovers, heard all this and sneered at Jesus. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves before other people, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued by people is deeply offensive to God.

Observation: Jesus' teaching echoed the wisdom of ancient Hebrew sages in saying that obsessively amassing the "treasures" of this world does not produce a satisfying life (Proverbs 14:22). Sadly, many religious leaders in Jesus' day overlooked or ignored that part of their tradition. But Jesus said treasure in heaven, i.e. treasure by God's standards, is the most precious item we can collect. Our heart follows our treasure—and what we treasure shows where our heart's loyalties really lie.

Application: Jesus was not opposed to wealth. He was opposed to putting wealth above God in life's priorities. "When the Pharisees, a money-obsessed bunch, heard him say these things, they rolled their eyes, dismissing him as hopelessly out of touch." (Luke 16:14, Message) Does Jesus' teaching about worldly wealth and true riches seem out of touch to you? Does it challenge you? Does it inspire you?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, sometimes my priorities get out of order, in little things or even in big things. I offer myself to you as my true master. Help me prioritize you above all else in my life. Amen.

Tuesday, January 31

Scripture: John 3:1-19; 7:43-52

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom." Nicodemus asked, "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?" Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said, "How are these things possible?" "Jesus answered, "You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things? I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don't receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him isn't judged; whoever doesn't believe in him is already judged, because they don't believe in the name of God's only Son. "This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil.

So the crowd was divided over Jesus. Some wanted to arrest him, but no one grabbed him. The guards returned to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked, "Why didn't you bring him?" The guards answered, "No one has ever spoken the way he does." The Pharisees replied, "Have you too been deceived? Have any of the leaders believed in him? Has any Pharisee? No, only this crowd, which doesn't know the Law. And they are under God's curse!" Nicodemus, who was one of them and had come to Jesus earlier, said, "Our Law doesn't judge someone without first hearing him and learning what he is doing, does it?" They answered him, "You are not from Galilee too, are you? Look it up and you will see that the prophet doesn't come from Galilee."

Observation: Nicodemus, a member of the highest Hebrew religious council, saw Jesus' spiritual power, and wanted to get to know this new teacher. Yet he could have lost a lot, socially and economically, if his colleagues saw him with Jesus. He came at night. Later, when the council moved toward condemning Jesus, he timidly asked them to give Jesus a fair hearing, but seems to have backed off when they ridiculed him.

Application: Nicodemus tried to protect Jesus by citing a key (and not even controversial) part of the law. They didn't respond to the sound basis for his question, but tried to intimidate him: was he following the Galilean? It seems to have worked. When have you kept silent about a matter of principle because of scorn or other social risk if you pressed a point?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me not to shy away from the light you brought into the world, even if it shines on places where I need to change and grow. Blow the renewing wind of your Spirit through my life. Amen.

Wednesday, February 1

Scripture: John 19:38-42; Luke 23:50-53

After this Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate if he could take away the body of Jesus. Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one because he feared the Jewish authorities. Pilate gave him permission, so he came and took the body away. Nicodemus, the one who at first had come to Jesus at night, was there too. He brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, nearly seventy-five pounds in all. Following Jewish burial customs, they took Jesus' body and wrapped it, with the spices, in linen cloths. There was a garden in the place where Jesus was crucified, and in the garden was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish Preparation Day and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus in it.

Now there was a man named Joseph who was a member of the council. He was a good and righteous man. He hadn't agreed with the plan and actions of the council. He was from the Jewish city of Arimathea and eagerly anticipated God's kingdom. This man went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Taking it down, he wrapped it in a linen cloth and laid it in a tomb carved out of the rock, in which no one had ever been buried.

Observation: Jesus' trial was a travesty—the high priest pushed from the very start to condemn and execute Jesus. At least two council members, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, seem to have disagreed, but kept silent. But they went public after the crucifixion, asking the right to take Jesus' body and bury it decently. Their belated but real commitment and courage set the stage for the empty tomb on the resurrection morning.

Application: Joseph's ownership of a new stone tomb, and Nicodemus' provision of nearly 75 pounds of costly embalming spices, showed that, like most other council members, these men were quite wealthy. What role do you think their economic and social eminence likely played in their choice to keep their love for Jesus out of sight? What might have moved them to make that allegiance public after he had died on the cross?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I thank you that it's never too late to give you my open allegiance and love. Help me to move beyond any fear or embarrassment I might feel about being one of your disciples. Amen.

Thursday, February 2

Scripture: Mark 10:17-25

As Jesus continued down the road, a man ran up, knelt before him, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?" Jesus replied, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except the one God. You know the commandments: Don't commit murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't give false testimony. Don't cheat. Honor your father and mother." "Teacher," he responded, "I've kept all of these things since I was a boy." Jesus looked at him carefully and loved him. He said, "You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me." But the man was dismayed at this statement and went away saddened, because he had many possessions. Looking around, Jesus said to his disciples, "It will be very hard for the wealthy to enter God's kingdom!" His words startled the disciples, so Jesus told them again, "Children, it's

difficult to enter God's kingdom! It's easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's kingdom."

Observation: A devout, apparently earnest young man asked Jesus what he needed to do to obtain eternal life. Jesus "looked at him carefully and loved him," and identified his fixation on wealth as his main spiritual obstacle. Unwilling and unable to reset his priorities, the man went away sad. Jesus startled his disciples with a hyperbole ("a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle") about the difficulty of breaking wealth's grip on a human heart.

Application: Jesus' words were personal for that particular young man, not a general command for all Christians. There were other affluent people in the Bible (Abraham in Genesis, Zacchaeus in Luke 19) who did not hear that they should sell all they had. What was the heart issue Jesus wanted the young man to face up to? What made it so hard for him to respond to Jesus' call?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you offer me heaven's riches. Give me a heart that can accurately assess the treasure of your kingdom, valuing it properly against any other claims. Amen.

Friday, February 3

Scripture: Acts 7:55-8:3, 26:1-18

But Stephen, enabled by the Holy Spirit, stared into heaven and saw God's majesty and Jesus standing at God's right side. He exclaimed, "Look! I can see heaven on display and the Human One standing at God's right side!" At this, they shrieked and covered their ears. Together, they charged at him, threw him out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses placed their coats in the care of a young man named Saul. As they battered him with stones, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, accept my life!" Falling to his knees, he shouted, "Lord, don't hold this sin against them!" Then he died.

Saul was in full agreement with Stephen's murder. At that time, the church in Jerusalem began to be subjected to vicious harassment. Everyone except the apostles was scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. Some pious men buried Stephen and deeply grieved over him. Saul began to wreak havoc against the church. Entering one house after another, he would drag off both men and women and throw them into prison.

Agrippa said to Paul, "You may speak for yourself." So Paul gestured with his hand and began his defense. "King Agrippa, I consider myself especially fortunate that I stand before you today as I offer my defense concerning all the accusations the Jews have brought against me. This is because you understand well all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I ask you to listen to me patiently. Every Jew knows the way of life I have followed since my youth because, from the beginning, I was among my people and in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time. If they wanted to, they could testify that I followed the way of life set out by the most exacting group of our religion. I am a Pharisee. Today I am standing trial because of the hope in the promise God gave our ancestors. This is the promise our twelve tribes hope to receive as they earnestly worship night and day. The Jews are accusing me, King Agrippa, because of this hope! Why is it inconceivable to you that God raises the dead? "I really thought that I ought to oppose the name of Jesus the Nazarene in every way possible. And that's exactly what I did in Jerusalem. I locked up many of God's holy people in prison under the authority of the chief priests. When they were condemned to death, I voted against them. In one synagogue after another—indeed, in all the synagogues—I would often torture them, compelling them to slander God. My rage bordered on the hysterical as I pursued them, even to foreign cities. "On one such journey, I was going to Damascus with the full authority of the chief priests. While on the road at midday, King Agrippa, I saw a light from heaven shining around me and my traveling

companions. That light was brighter than the sun. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice that said to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me? It's hard for you to kick against a spear.' Then I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord replied, 'I am Jesus, whom you are harassing. Get up! Stand on your feet! I have appeared to you for this purpose: to appoint you as my servant and witness of what you have seen and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to open their eyes. Then they can turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, and receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are made holy by faith in me.'

Observation: Saul entered the book of Acts as a minor character, holding other people's coats. He quickly became prominent as a driven, deadly persecutor of Christians. A stunning encounter with the risen Christ utterly changed his life. It was so pivotal that Acts told the story three times (Acts 9:1-20, 22:1-16 as well as today's passage in Acts 26). Before long, Saul began using his Roman name, Paul (Acts 13:9). He was still passionate and driven, but now about sharing persuasively that Jesus was, in fact, the long-awaited Messiah.

Application: When he faced death (at the hands of a Roman executioner), Paul wrote, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day" (2 Timothy 4:7-8). Does it sound to you as though Paul was sad about leaving his promising career as a Jewish leader to follow Jesus? In what ways has your commitment to Christ given you a sense of purpose?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your call changed Saul's life. He went on to change millions of other lives. Give me listening ears and an open heart to what you wish to do through your call on my life. Amen.

Saturday, February 4

Scripture: Philippians 3:3-11, 1Timothy 1:12-16

We are the circumcision. We are the ones who serve by God's Spirit and who boast in Christ Jesus. We don't put our confidence in rituals performed on the body, though I have good reason to have this kind of confidence. If anyone else has reason to put their confidence in physical advantages, I have even more: I was circumcised on the eighth day. I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews. With respect to observing the Law, I'm a Pharisee. With respect to devotion to the faith, I harassed the church. With respect to righteousness under the Law, I'm blameless. These things were my assets, but I wrote them off as a loss for the sake of Christ. But even beyond that, I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have lost everything for him, but what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ and be found in him. In Christ I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law but rather from the faithfulness of Christ. It is the righteousness of God that is based on faith. The righteousness that I have comes from knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the participation in his sufferings. It includes being conformed to his death so that I may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead.

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength because he considered me faithful. So he appointed me to ministry even though I used to speak against him, attack his people, and I was proud. But I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and without faith. Our Lord's favor poured all over me along with the faithfulness and love that are in Christ Jesus. This saying is reliable and deserves full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save

sinners"—and I'm the biggest sinner of all. But this is why I was shown mercy, so that Christ Jesus could show his endless patience to me first of all. So I'm an example for those who are going to believe in him for eternal life.

Observation: Paul wrote to the Philippians that if we could save ourselves by religious performance, he'd gladly put his record up against anyone. But those religious assets no longer counted. He "wrote them off," and trusted in Christ's grace. In 1 Timothy, he recalled when he was a persecutor and described himself as "the biggest sinner of all." But he did so, not in self-loathing or despair, but to bear witness to the amazing difference God's mercy had made in his life.

Application: The young Pharisee Saul had all the human credentials—"proper" birth, great education, and even persecuting Christians. What are the family heritages, human accomplishments and credentials you are proudest of? If preserving any of them ever conflicted with heeding God's call on your life, what choice would you make?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, like Paul, I've done plenty of things that disappointed you and hurt others. Thank you for showing me mercy, and calling me into your service. Amen.