

“Us” and “Them”

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Saul was born into a devout family and grew up in the faith. He joined in worship consistently and was a devoted student of the Bible. He strove to learn and kept the commandments of God given in Scripture. He followed the rules of his religion and the obligations of his tradition, which he saw as deeply intertwined. He was confident that he knew the will of God as revealed in the Word of God. And he was passionate in his defense of the faith – so much so that he joined a cohort of men known as Pharisees.

The Pharisees arose among the Jewish community a century before in protest against laxity in keeping the Law (including the 10 commandments) given to the people in the wilderness of Sinai after Moses led them from slavery in Egypt and before they entered the holy land. The Jewish people at the time of Saul were under the rule of the Roman Empire – the latest in a series of empires that had conquered the holy land leaving death and destruction in their wake. Armed Roman soldiers walked the streets. Roman taxes left many impoverished, and so Jewish tax collectors were despised as traitors aligning themselves with Rome. Zealots led rebellions against Rome that were swiftly and brutally crushed. Samaritans – considered by the Jewish people at the time to be national enemies and religious heretics – continued their border skirmishes with their Jewish neighbors in Judea. It was a violent, anxious, uncertain time.

The people of God wrested with the evil and harm and suffering all around them. They asked “why?”

In his book, “God and the Pandemic,” Anglican theologian N.T. Wright suggests there is no rational answer to this question, because evil falls outside the realm of reason. Evil is not part of the plan of our good and reasonable and compassionate Creator. God does not want or cause our pain – *and* God created human beings with the freedom to love, which means we also have the freedom to *not* love, to sin, to want and cause pain. Perhaps, Wright continues, rather than ask “why?,” we ask, “How will we respond?” “How will we help?”¹

The Pharisees responded by clinging to the law. In their view: God will bless our people if we obey the commandments, observe dietary and ritual restrictions, keep ourselves pure in an impure society. We are to separate ourselves – Pharisee means ‘separated one’ – from those who

¹ N.T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020.

believe differently than we do. Avoid sinners who don't meet our standards of correctness and morality. Don't welcome "them," because they are a threat to "us."

The Pharisees believed that when the Messiah came he would sort this all out. He would reward the faithful, punish the sinners, defeat the Roman Empire, and restore their people to power. So when Saul heard rumblings coming from Judea about a rabbi named Jesus, whom some were claiming was the Messiah (even though he had been crucified) Saul went to Jerusalem to learn more.

We can imagine Saul was scandalized by what he heard.

Yes, Jesus demonstrated God's powerful healing love: he cured people of their diseases and freed people from demonic oppression and feed people miraculously abundant meals. But he sometimes did this on the Sabbath, when according to the commandments, no work was to be done.

Yes, Jesus taught from the law, declaring that the Greatest Commandment is "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' (Mat 22:37," and adding a second like it (from the book of Leviticus, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But when he was asked, "who is my neighbor?," he gave as an example of godly behavior toward someone in need a Samaritan.

Jesus also offered his own interpretations of the Bible, "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you," with an authority no scribe would dare claim.

Yes, Jesus had dinner with Pharisees. But he also ate with sinners who did not have or keep the law. He touched the ritually unclean, like people with leprosy and bleeding disorders. He spoke with women in public and commended their faith. He affirmed the value and dignity of children. He called both a Zealot named Simon and a tax collector named Matthew to be in his inner circle of disciples.

Most startling of all, Jesus claimed to be God. He said things like, "the Father and I are one." And "I am the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep," using for himself the sacred name of the Lord, "I am who I am," *Yahweh*. Calling the Temple of God "my Father's house," which he declared is to a house of prayer for all people

All of this led the religious authorities, including the Pharisees, to have Jesus arrested, handed over the Roman authorities, and killed.

When a growing community of Jesus' followers declared that Jesus had risen from the dead, appeared to his disciples, and ascended into heaven with the promise to return – Saul

would have none of it. This was a threat to his faith, his identity, his people. It needed to stop.

The religious authorities felt the same. So they gave Saul permission and armed forces to hunt down, arrest, and imprison people of “the Way” (a very early name for followers of Christ), in a time when such imprisonment could be followed by execution. Saul thought that he was doing the right thing, that this violence and trauma were acceptable, that the end justified the means.

Saul was wrong, they did not, and in his actions against those he believed were “sinners,” he committed grievous sin – a truth revealed to Saul by Christ Jesus himself on the Road to Damascus. Saul experienced the gospel truth.

Christ Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, defeating sin and death forever. Christ Jesus did indeed ascend into heaven, transcending the limits of time and space and so, by the Holy Spirit, is present with every one, every where, every time. Christ Jesus will indeed come again – as he did before, not as a violent zealot slaying his enemies, but as a loving Lord healing us and the whole creation.

Christ Jesus called to Saul and changed his life forever. Saul the Pharisee became Paul the Apostle. The persecutor of the church became the founder of churches throughout the known world. The man who was convinced his righteousness was in keeping the law declared that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ as a gift.

Paul knew this truth from hard won experience...

‘If I have all the spiritual gifts, and faith that can move mountains, and understand doctrine correctly and completely, **but don’t have love, it means nothing**. Love is patient and kind. Love is not arrogant or rude or resentful. Love does not insist on its own way and keeps no record of wrong. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but celebrates the truth. Love bears the weight, trusts the Lord, hopes for the future, carries on. Love never fails’ (1 Corinthians 13, *paraphrase*)

In Christ, Paul came to understand there is no “us” and “them.” We are *all* saints and sinners, needing and receiving the mercy of the Lord. The way forward is not separating ourselves from those who believe differently than we do, but engaging them with empathy. The answer is never violence. The answer is always love.