

The Apostle Paul Wasn't Perfect

Lesson 03 of the series, "Imperfect ≠ Unusable"

1. Before he became known as the "Apostle Paul", Saul of Tarsus was a self-righteous, legalistic, religious terrorist.

"I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault." Philippians 3:5-6 (NLT)

"I was in complete agreement when your witness Stephen was killed. I stood by and kept the coats they took off when they stoned him." Acts 22:20 (NLT)

"Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison." Acts 8:1-3 (NLT)

Note: Jesus humbled Saul and showed him the errors of his ways.

"Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains. As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?' 'Who are you, lord?' Saul asked. And the voice replied, 'I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.' The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice but saw no one! Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink." Acts 9:1-9 (NLT)

Life Application: We must humble ourselves or God will humble us.

"The greatest among you must be a servant. But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Matthew 23:11-12 (NLT)

"Pride goes before destruction, and haughtiness before a fall." Proverbs 16:18 (NLT)

Life Application: God loves to use imperfect people so that we can never boast about ourselves.

"God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it."

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NLT)

"I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith."

Philippians 3:7-9 (NLT)

2. God chose Saul a.k.a. Paul to be a Christian missionary to the Gentiles, people he once despised.

"Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision, calling, 'Ananias!' 'Yes, Lord!' he replied. The Lord said, 'Go over to Straight Street, to the house of Judas. When you get there, ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is praying to me right now. I have shown him a vision of a man named Ananias coming in and laying hands on him so he can see again.' 'But Lord,' exclaimed Ananias, 'I've heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name.' But the Lord said, 'Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake.' So Ananias went and found Saul. He laid his hands on him and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road, has sent me so that you might regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Instantly something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized." Acts 9:10-18 (NLT)

"You know what I was like when I followed the Jewish religion—how I violently persecuted God's church. I did my best to destroy it... But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by his marvelous grace. Then it pleased him to reveal his Son to me so that I would proclaim the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles."

Galatians 1:13-16 (NLT)

Life Application: God often chooses people whom we would consider least likely to carry out his work.

“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength to do his work. He considered me trustworthy and appointed me to serve him, even though I used to blaspheme the name of Christ. In my insolence, I persecuted his people. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. Oh, how generous and gracious our Lord was! He filled me with the faith and love that come from Christ Jesus. This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”—and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life.” 1 Timothy 1:12-16 (NLT)

Life Application: We should never limit God or rule out people for His service.

“My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the LORD. “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.” Isaiah 55:8-9 (NLT)

Life Application: God wants what is best for us more than we do.

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take. Don’t be impressed with your own wisdom. Instead, fear the LORD and turn away from evil. Then you will have healing for your body and strength for your bones.”

Proverbs 3:5-8 (NLT)

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Connect Group Questions

1. Describe a time in your life when you underestimated someone and they surprised you.
2. Have you ever been surprised by how God used you? If so, describe the circumstances and share what you learned from your experience.
3. Read Acts 9:1-18 and 1 Timothy 1:12-16. Why do you think God chose Paul to become a Christian missionary? Would you have chosen him? Why? Why not?
4. Read Philippians 3:5-9 and Ephesians 2:8-9. All of us hate to be judged by others but it’s easier than we think to become self-righteous. What are some things we can do to keep from becoming prideful and self-righteous?
5. Discuss how God used the unlikely people in the following list:
 - Jacob was a liar. (Genesis 27)
 - Joseph was abused. (Genesis 37)
 - Gideon was fearful. (Judges 6-7)
 - Samson and Solomon were womanizers. (Judges 16 & 1 Kings 11)
 - Rahab was a prostitute. (Joshua 2)
 - Jonah ran from God. (Jonah 1)
 - Moses and David were murderers. (Exodus 2 & 2 Samuel 11)
 - Lazarus was dead! (John 11-12)

If God can use these people why can’t he use me? What excuses do we sometimes give for not being available? Why?

6. Discuss the following quotations:

“And pray for me, too. Ask God to give me the right words so I can boldly explain God’s mysterious plan that the Good News is for Jews and Gentiles alike.” Paul in Ephesians 6:19

“I’ve seen extreme bravery from the least likely of people. Life is about the moments when it’s all gone wrong. That’s when we define ourselves.” Bear Grylls

“Pride must die in you or nothing of heaven can live in you.” Andrew Murray

“Don’t accept your dog’s admiration as conclusive evidence that you are wonderful.” Ann Landers

“But many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then.” Jesus in Matthew 19:30