

Acts 9:1-20 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. ⁴ Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." ⁶ So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." ⁷ And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. ⁸ Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank. ¹⁰ Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ So the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. ¹² "And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight." ¹³ Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ "And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ "For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." ¹⁷ And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. ¹⁹ So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. ²⁰ Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.

Summer is coming and that always means one thing. The television is sure to be filled with commercials promising drastic weight loss within weeks. They show the pictures. A man who used to wear size 60 jeans holds them up next to his new skinny body. The woman who used to wear only baggy shirts now struts around in a bikini with confidence. Yes, commercial after commercial promises that their pill or their machine or their program is the easy answer. See what a difference their product can make! They have the proof. Just look at the before and after pictures.

In our reading for the day we have an amazing before and after picture painted for us of the Apostle Paul. The first verse of our texts says this, “Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem..” We have pictured for us a man with anger in his heart and wrath on his mind. He stands with chains in hand just waiting to find another Christian to persecute. He carries in his back pocket orders from the Jews to arrest all who have accepted the teaching of that criminal Jesus.

Twenty verses later we are given another description of this same man Paul. It says, “Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.” Here, we have pictured for us a man with peace in his heart and joy on his mind. We see a man who has placed down his chains and has placed into his hands the cross of Christ. In his back pocket he carries around the word of God ready to share it with anyone that will listen. What a difference twenty verses can make! What a difference meeting Jesus can make! What a difference a Baptism can make!

Indeed, a lot happened in those twenty verses or so of our text. Jesus had appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus. Jesus had called him to repentance for the persecution he been enacting against the church. Then Jesus struck him blind and sent him into town for further instruction. Three days later, Jesus sent his servant Ananias to heal Saul’s physical and spiritual blindness. He healed his physical blindness by touching his eyes. Immediately, scales fell from his eyes and he could see. And he healed his spiritual blindness by baptizing him in the name of the One whom He had been persecuting. Immediately, he received the Holy Spirit. Meeting Jesus, being baptized, and receiving the Holy Spirit changed the very essence of who Paul was. He went from disbeliever to disciple. He went from persecutor to proclaimer. He went from enemy to evangelist. What a difference a Baptism can make! Indeed it was Paul’s Baptism into Christ that changed him from the guy in the before picture in the first verses of our text into the guy in the after picture in our last verse. Baptism has that kind of power. It has life-transforming power.

Indeed the bible is clear throughout that our faith and our Baptism changes the very essence of who we are. We are changed from sinners to saints. We were dirty and are now clean. We were dead, but are now are

alive. As that man Saul, then Paul, would later teach, “Christians are new creations, the old has gone and the new has come.”

No doubt people noticed the differences in Paul. When Ananias was called to visit Paul, he was afraid of him. But after his conversion, Paul was welcomed into many a home to teach. For it was evident to all that Paul’s zeal for persecution had become his zeal for Jesus through his Baptism. The powerful effect of Paul’s Baptism was always before their eyes.

The problem with before and after pictures about weight loss is that even if the pictures aren’t faked, not all people will receive the same results. It is easy for us today to dismiss Paul as a special case. Surely Baptism doesn’t make that great difference in everyone, does it? Realize that we share the same Baptism and the same Spirit with Paul. Indeed then, our lives as well should show the transforming power of Baptism.

But we must ask today as we examine ourselves, “Does the fact that we are baptized Christians make enough difference in our lives that people can tell a difference between us and nonbelievers?” There are two main ways in which God says that our lives will look different from those around us.

First, God says that the world will know we are Christians by our love. In other words, our acts of love should be noticeable. We are to be people who are zealous for showing Jesus’ love to others. We should be so concerned for others that people will quite frankly think we have gone a little overboard. Is your life marked with love for others to the point where people have to wonder what would cause a person to be so selfless and caring?

Secondly, the bible also tells us that we are to be noticeable in the world by our morality, our purity, our right living. We should be so absorbed by God’s will and ways that we don’t just act like the rest of the world. For the young people in our church, your identity in Christ should make you different than those around you at school. The decisions you make about drinking, the decisions you make about gossiping, and the decision you make about your purity with the opposite sex should be determined by who you are as God’s child. And as you let God’s Holy Spirit direct your actions, your schoolmates will notice that you are different. Some may make fun of you, but others will begin to respect you and wonder why you act the way you do. For those out working in the world, your identity in Christ should make a difference in how you conduct yourself at work among your

peers. The integrity and honesty with which you conduct your business, the way in which you refrain from engaging in careless gossip, and the way in which you seek to always give God glory for your success should also be directed by your identity in Christ. And just like at school, your peers also will notice. For husbands, your identity in Christ means that people should notice the way in which you go out of your way to love and care for the needs of your wife. For wives, it means that people should notice the way in which you honor your husbands and seek to aid them in every way. For single men and women, it means that people should notice the purity with which you conduct yourself before marriage. For children, it means that people should notice how well you do at respecting and honoring your parent's decisions and authority.

For if we as Christians don't look much different from the world, it shows that we have not let the Spirit do all the work in us that He wants. For you see, meeting Jesus, being baptized, and receiving the Holy Spirit change the very essence of who we are. As long as we don't get let our sinful desires stand in the way, the Spirit will work His fruit in our lives. And we can be assured that the fruit of the Spirit will be more than noticeable in our world which is filled with the fruit of unrighteousness. Eventually, people in our world will begin to understand what a different meeting Jesus makes, what a difference receiving the Holy Spirit makes, what a difference a Baptism can make.

For the ways in which each of us have thwarted the Spirit's sanctifying work in us, we must indeed repent today and come before our God. We must admit that all too often in certain parts of our lives our identity in Christ has only been a nice comfort at church rather than a transforming power in our lives. We come to our God and ask Him to restore us to that life-changing identity we have in Him. And when we do, He announces to us again just as He did at our Baptisms, your sins are forgiven, you are a new creation, and you have my Holy Spirit. And leaving with that forgiveness, we are free to go out and live as new creations. We are free to leave our before pictures of sinful life at the foot of the cross, and live the after pictures of holy life that our Baptism grants to us.

Thanks be to Jesus that He did not just leave us in our sins but has given to us newness of life in which to live all our days. Indeed what a difference a Baptism can make! Amen.