

## THE CHIEF SINNER

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“For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.”

~ Romans 12:3 ~

How does one make such an evaluation and what constitutes sound judgment?

Paul reveals his candid evaluation of himself at three different times in his life. He first calls himself “the least of the apostles” (1 Corinthians 15:9 NASB); then “the very least of all saints” (Ephesians 3:8 NASB); and finally, the chief sinner (1 Timothy 1:15 KJV). This is the chronological order in which these letters were written. But how does this help me in my own self-inspection, if none of these descriptors are my own honest judgment?

Since Jeremiah says the “heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?,” then my own “honest” judgment cannot be trusted. But the Bible’s judgment can be. What else does it say about me?

Ecclesiastes 9:3 states, “the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives.” Lamentations 3:39 asks, “Why should in any living mortal or any man offer complaint in view of his sins?” Romans 3:10-18 indicts the entire human race with among other things, “there is none who does good, there is not even one.” And finally Paul says of himself “nothing good dwells in me” (Romans 7:18). If this is true of the man who says he was blameless with respect to the Law (Phil. 3:6), where does that leave me?

We must ask ourselves if we really believe the things above to be true of us. If the answer is no, then I am guilty of unbelief and hypocrisy. Unbelief for not believing God’s evaluation and hypocrisy for implicitly claiming to be more righteous than I am – the very thing Paul warns about in Romans 12:3 above.

I am again a hypocrite if I do not believe myself to be the chief sinner because in failing to do so, I claim to be better than Paul. But in acknowledging my double hypocrisies I have a starting point in my self-evaluation.

Because there is at least one thing worse than being the chief sinner and that is to be a hypocrite. Christ loved and died for sinners, including the self-proclaimed chief sinner, but I can find no good word in scripture about hypocrites. Either I bend my knee and acknowledge the veracity of the Bible’s view of me, or I remain a hypocrite. Chief sinner or hypocrite are my only options.

You may rightly say that for Paul there was a progression over time in his self-evaluation and that he did not immediately declare himself the chief sinner. That is true. We all begin as hypocrites and the sooner we begin the earnest self-evaluation that Paul prescribes, and begin to see the horror of our own depravity, the better off we are. Asking Him to show us is a good starting place.

I have demonstrated, at least to myself, that I am indeed worse than Paul and therefore at best the chief sinner. And though I believe this demonstration is important in helping us to begin to grapple with this important issue, I do not believe that it will achieve any lasting effect on any of us, unless we are gripped by our own personally perceived and felt depravity. Only the Holy Spirit can do this work and then only if we want to see the truth. We must ask Him to strip away our hypocrisy in order to more clearly see our true selves.

To my shame, I find that what dwells in me is the evil and insanity of Ecclesiastes 9:3. Evil, because I perceive my chief problem to be pain and not sin. And insanity, because my blasphemously irrational demand is that God rectify this outrage immediately and forever. The Holy Spirit is all that stands against this. No other good dwells in me. You may describe it differently in yourself, but if the Bible is to be believed then something like this is at the center of us all. And one day the light of Christ will shine on it.

It is this monster that must die if we are to live with Christ. C.S. Lewis describes it this way in the following paragraph from *Till We Have Faces*. The speaker is the protagonist, who had been keeping a diary of her deepest thoughts, which she believed to be something of a masterpiece, until after she had been forced to read the diary to the gods.

“When the time comes to you at which you will be forced at last to utter the speech which has lain at the center of your soul for years, which you have, all that time, idiot-like, been saying over and over, you’ll not talk about the joy of words. I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?”

It is this face, this new creature as the Bible calls us, that Jesus Christ is fashioning in us. We are not yet ready to face Him. We must be sanctified by acknowledging and repenting our sin, whether in outward deeds or inward sins like hypocrisy, pride, an unbiblical self-image, or lust for autonomy. And then in self-denial we must ask the Holy Spirit to destroy all that is evil in us, as we submit to His sovereign, life-giving will.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us covenant together to allow the Holy Spirit of God to dig out this awful monster of babbling sin within each of us.

This process begins on earth, where it is called sanctification, and for which there is great reward. After death it is renamed judgment and is accompanied by loss. Better to call yourself chief sinner now than for Jesus to declare you a hypocrite then.