

EKKLESIA 5-A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ACTS
ACTS 9
AUGUST 16, 2018

One of the things that I have enjoyed about living in Silicon Valley is hearing about the local titans of the industry. There was a book that came out by Julian Guthrie, who works for the San Francisco Chronicle, called *The Billionaire and the Mechanic*. While I haven't read the book, I listened as they discussed it for over an hour last week. This book is about Larry Ellison and his pursuit of his latest trophy, the America's Cup. Ellison's team racing aboard his boat, the Oracle, was the first team from the United States to win the America's Cup in 15 years. This book catalogues the strange journey that led to Ellison's success.

While that story is interesting enough, what I found more interesting is some of the local legend and commentary about this man. The more they talked about him, the more I heard about how this man is obsessed with trophies, some literal and some figurative. This man has always been driven to be the best, fastest and richest. Those goals have led him to the rabid accumulation of trophies. Trophy wives, he has had four of them so far. Trophy homes, he owns \$250 million worth of beach front properties in Malibu, multiple homes in Lake Tahoe, a \$110 million estate in Woodside, and oh by the way, he just bought a \$600 million island in Hawaii. He has a fleet of trophy cars protected in a massive climate controlled garage. He has a fleet of trophy planes including private jets and two military jets. He has a trophy golf course in California, an America's Cup team trophy, a trophy tennis tournament, a five-story trophy yacht, a trophy company called Oracle and one of his grandest trophies is being one of the top ten richest people in the world with \$60 billion dollars. The man has a lot of trophies.

I am not trying to shame this man or the things he has, although it could be said, it is a bit much. What I found interesting is that the author of this latest book contends it is never enough for Mr. Ellison. Every trophy can never be the last one. He is a man who is driven by more. He is constantly working for more. Never resting and finding value in whatever trophy will be next.

What's interesting about this man is he is not alone. While I am not an expert on the Bay Area, I have come to terms with its essence. We live in a meritocracy. You are what you achieve. While Silicon Valley may not be explicitly about conspicuous consumerism, it is obsessed with achievements and the trophies that can be gained. While it may not be just about money, many people here are obsessed with the trophy of education. The trophy of success. The trophy of being known. The trophy of power. Many people living in this valley have a trophy case that gets more of their attention than anything else in this life.

I know you know this, but there is nothing new under the sun. There was a man 2,000 years ago who had a pretty nice trophy case. A man named Saul filled out his resume for us in Philippians 3:4B-6. He was completely Hebrew, circumcised on the eighth day and of the tribe of Benjamin. He was a trained Pharisee who trained with Gamaliel, who was the president of the Jewish high court known as the Sanhedrin. Saul said that according to the law, he was faultless. He knew the book, he knew the law and he practiced them meticulously. On top of that, he was an ardent defender of the Jewish faith when he said he mercilessly and zealously opposed followers of the heretical group called The Way who followed a carpenter out of Nazareth. His trophy case was full. Because Saul had a full trophy case, he fully believed he was on good terms with God. The trophies he had accumulated meant he had pleased God and had earned salvation. Then he went on a road trip to Damascus.

Acts 9:1-22

Saul had an encounter with God that changed him forever. In this defining moment, Saul came to realize that his trophies were meaningless. He had worked his whole life accumulating them by obeying the law and persecuting anyone who stood in his way. This supernatural encounter changed everything. There are so many great things to appreciate about this passage. One of my favorite parts, and one that had to be shocking to Saul, was that he was rendered blind for a few days. Throughout the Old Testament prophets often called the people of Israel blind. Not that they were literally blind, but that they didn't see the truth that was right in front of them.

Often times, sensory malfunction, including blindness, were tied up metaphorically with idolatry. This man who had used his whole life to see the scripture and see the truth realized in one defining moment that he had been blind all along. The trophies he was seeking were idols that kept him from the truth of Jesus.

God orchestrates a divine appointment with a man named Ananias to open Paul's eyes literally and figuratively. A whole sermon could be devoted to Saul's conversion. A whole other sermon could be devoted to this man Ananias and his faithfulness in the midst of such a scary task. I want to show you something else. In verse 17, Ananias speaks on Jesus' behalf and heals Saul's blindness and introduces him to the Holy Spirit. Saul is baptized and immediately begins to preach. The best part comes at the end of our passage today in verse 22. This guy, only days earlier, was rabidly and zealously persecuting Christians. As we talked about last week, he helped orchestrate and oversee the persecution, imprisonment and even death of Christians, as you saw in the story of Stephen. In fact, at the beginning of this chapter, we see that Saul was going towards Damascus with search warrants to find Christians and bring them before the Sanhedrin to be tried and sentenced.

The word about Saul had spread far and wide. He was an opponent. He was a terrorizer. He was an enemy. He was a persecutor and he was good at his job, so it makes a lot of sense that people would be confused. In previous chapters, you are bound to see all about God's wild grace. We have discussed this idea of God's uncomfortable grace that was extended to people that seemingly didn't deserve it, the Samaritans. Then the Samaritan magician, and then the piece de resistance, an Ethiopian eunuch. In all of these instances, these would be considered unusual recipients when it comes to God's grace. Now we come to Saul, the proud trophy collector, who violently opposed Jesus. Why would God make such an invitation of grace? The sermon this week is tied to last week, but I want you to see something else about God's grace as it pertains to salvation. I want you to understand why he would allow even Saul to know this grace.

I read an interesting story recently, and I want to read to you part of an accompanying letter that was included with the story. In this letter, a man is asking to join in the fight against Germany and Adolph Hitler during WWII.

March 3, 1942

His Excellency Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States of America

The White House, Washington D.C.

Dear Mr. President:

May I take the liberty of encroaching on your valuable time and that of your staff at the White House? Mindful of the critical days the nation is now passing through, I do so only because the prerogative of your high office alone can decide my difficult and singular situation.

Under your masterful leadership, men of all creeds and nationalities are waging desperate war to determine, in the last analysis, whether they shall finally serve and live in an ethical society under God or become enslaved by a devilish and pagan regime.

I am one of many, but I can render service to this great cause, and I have a life to give that it may, with the help of all, triumph in the end.

All my relatives and friends soon will be marching for freedom and decency under the Stars and Stripes. For this reason, Mr. President, I am respectfully submitting this petition to you to enquire as to whether I may be allowed to join them in their struggle against tyranny and oppression?

-Patrick Hitler-

This letter was written by William Patrick Hitler, the nephew of Adolph Hitler. Not only was he the nephew of Hitler, but earlier on before WWII officially began, he was an official in the Fuhrer's court. Now then, what would you say if you were President Roosevelt? "Sure, come on

board. I can't see any reason why an able-bodied lad like yourself wouldn't be a great addition to our fighting forces." Of course, you wouldn't say that. Why would you allow a known leader and relative of one of your sworn enemies to switch sides and be on your team? President Roosevelt was impressed with this letter, and he passed it on to J. Edgar Hoover who cleared Patrick Hitler to serve, which he did valiantly for three years until he was injured and discharged from the war effort.

Why would President Roosevelt allow such a dangerous defector to serve in such an important role as the armed forces? While there is no record of Roosevelt's direct response, I wonder if it was more than just having just another warm body. I wonder if it wasn't a shrewd move that was more potent than the military skills of this one man. Might it have been because the message would be clear, our opponents are so far off base that even their leaders want to fight with us? Beyond that, what does that say about the defense of freedom and the righteous cause when our country would allow someone like that to have a second chance and serve? At the end of it all, he might have been thinking what a great message it would send when people learned that even our enemies can't resist the righteousness of our cause. Saul's name was changed to Paul, and he realized the power of God extending grace to even him.

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Paul is thrilled to have been allowed to serve. The most potent thing he says is found in verses 15-16. He realized he was extended grace for one simple reason, so everyone would know that no one is beyond God's reach. He says, "I was the worst of sinners, yet God saved me so that everyone would know the immense patience that Jesus showed me as an example of how great his grace is."

This revelatory moment from Paul makes something abundantly clear. Paul realized that trophy chasing was pointless. In fact, he realized something amazing. I am the trophy. He says as much in 2 Corinthians 2:14 when he says, "Followers of Jesus Christ follow Jesus in a triumphal

procession.” A triumphal procession was not as glamorous as you might think. Conquering Romans often practiced triumphal processions and it looked something like this. The conquering king would enter the city and bring with him several of the people he had conquered. The triumphal procession was not for a powerful king to be followed by his mighty soldiers, but rather to be followed by the weak, broken people he had conquered. In this moment, Paul stops collecting trophies when he realizes he was one. Not a trophy of might. Not a trophy of works, but a trophy of grace. A conquered man who could earn nothing for himself. A man who brought nothing to the table. He was a trophy of grace. He was an example that God would/could save even his enemies. That God is so righteous and so gracious that even his enemies could not resist him.

Paul wrote seventy percent of the New Testament and started countless churches. He helped lead the charge for the gospel towards Rome. Let me be clear. We might be prone to think that God saw great potential in Saul because of his zeal and knowledge of scriptures and thought, “I really need that soldier on my side.” That wasn’t the case. God extended grace to Saul and used him despite his shortcomings. Despite his terrible trophy collection. The reason God extended grace to Saul was as an example for all that would follow. No one is beyond my reach. Beyond that, I can use broken sinful things and redeem them to write seventy percent of the New Testament and start churches all over the empire. Not because they are good, but because I am good. Not because they are strong, but because I am. Paul was a trophy of grace.

Lest you think this is a one-off story, this is God’s M.O. throughout the Bible. There are many major heroes of the Old Testament, but if you really had to distill it down, you would probably land on Abraham, Moses and David. I have to tell you that all of these men are trophies of grace. Abraham twice tried to give his wife away to another man to protect his own hide. Moses was a murderer with an immense stutter who tried to excuse himself from God’s call. David was an adulterous, backstabbing murderer who served his own desires rather than God’s call. Yet God extended grace to them, not because he prefers murderers and adulterers and commends their behavior but as an example that no one is beyond his reach. That no one is too

far gone. As a reminder that we have to stop trying to fill up our trophy cases on this earth because none of them will satisfy and none of them will earn your way into his presence. The only way is by realizing you are a trophy of his grace. You are being led in a triumphal procession as a conquered, broken, sinful person who has value because the king has extended it to you.

My son Bennett loves superheroes, and I mean all of them. He spends time drawing them, talking about them and watching them. That love has been cultivated after seeing and reading about superheroes, but he also loves his Winnie the Pooh bear. He has had it since he was a child. Just to be clear, he didn't watch Winnie the Pooh and then want a bear. Winnie the Pooh didn't earn his love, he's just always had it. Winnie wasn't loved because he was worthy. He was worthy because he was loved.

For all of us in this room who are followers of Jesus, you are a spiritual version of Winnie. God's love for you is not because you are worthy. You are worthy because you are loved. He extended grace to you not because of the trophies you have earned, but because when Jesus went to the cross, he earned you as a trophy. A trophy of his grace. His spilled blood and broken body were an atoning sacrifice for you. No matter what you accomplish in this life and no matter how many good works you accomplish in this life, your trophies will never be enough. That is why the hymn says, "I will cherish the old rugged cross, till my trophies at last I lay down. I will cling to the old rugged cross, and exchange it some day for a crown."

A couple of questions I want to ask you today. 1) Are you still trying to fill up the trophy case? Are you focused on the meritocracy of Silicon Valley or have you come to terms with your true value in the triumphal procession of Jesus? Maybe it isn't even the pursuit of stuff. Maybe it is the pursuit of good works? Good works are integral to the Christian life, but they only make sense as a response to a loving God who has called you and saved you. 2) What does it look like to embrace being a trophy of grace? Does your spirituality wax and wane based upon your daily

achievements? Does your closeness to God hinge on how good you think you have been? Or are you resting in your position as a beloved child of the king?

I'll finish with this today. The America's Cup trophy is considered the oldest trophy in international sport. It precedes the modern advent of the Olympic Games by almost 50 years all the way back to 1851. It is also considered one of the most difficult trophies to win because only four nations have won this trophy in the long history of this expensive, challenging and competitive sport. Because of that, you might understand the following paragraph from a recent Wall Street Journal article about Ellison's dogged pursuit of this trophy.

Then again, he understands that his legacy will be forever intertwined with the America's Cup. Not long before he became the first American to win it since 1995, I suggested to him that if he prevailed, the first words of his obituary might be about sailing rather than his business achievements. He did not disagree. "Oracle could disappear someday," he said. "The America's Cup will not." (WSJ 5/17/2013 Bruce Knecht)

Get this, Larry Ellison has won the America's Cup now several times. Now he wants to start a new version of the America's Cup. No one is exactly sure why, but I am guessing it is because he wants a new challenge and a new trophy. He's climbed to the top of the mountain and found there is no there there, so he is building a higher peak. Trophy cases get full and we are never content. We just build new cases.

The only way to know peace and joy and contentment in this world is to know you are the trophy, and you are loved just as you are by God. That everything is because of grace. This is the only trophy you will ever need.