

“Be Imitators of Me, As I Am of Christ”

Sermon Notes

- **Having observed the life of the Apostle Paul up close for one calendar year, let’s follow him as he follows Christ**

1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 3:17; 4:9

**3 compelling features of the faith of Paul the Apostle...*

1. Pauline Christianity has a thick skin (vv.1-9; 1 Corinthians 4:3-4; Romans 5:3-5; Philippians 2:14)

2. Pauline Christianity has a clear conscience (vv.10-21; Acts 23:1; Romans 9:1; 2 Corinthians 1:12; 1 Timothy 1:15; 2 Timothy 1:3)

3. Pauline Christianity has a tender heart (vv.22-27; Acts 21:13; Romans 9:2; 10:1; 2 Corinthians 2:4; 3:2; 6:11; 7:3; Philippians 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:17; 1 Timothy 1:15; Philemon 12, 20)

Next Week: Acts 25:1-25 - “I Appeal to Caesar”

MEFC Community Group Study Guide

For the week of December 8th-14th

Read carefully through the following article “Liar, Lunatic, or Reliable?: Why I Love the Apostle Paul”¹ written by John Piper. Once you’ve had the opportunity to soak it in, read through it once more and discuss it together as you gather for family worship or in your community group.

I have lived with the apostle Paul for over sixty years — admired him, envied him, feared him, pounded on him, memorized him, written poems about him, wept over his sufferings, soared with him, sunk to the brink of death with him, spent eight years preaching through his longest letter, imitated him. Ha — imitated him! In ten lives, I would not come close to his sufferings — or what he saw.

Can you really know a man who lived two thousand years ago? We have thirteen letters that he wrote and a short travelogue of his ministry — the book of Acts — written by his personal physician, Luke. My answer is yes, you can know him. And when you get to know him, you will either love him and believe him, or hate him as an impostor, or pity him as deceived, or, perhaps, simply be oblivious that you are dealing with a real man.

Perhaps you have heard the “liar, lunatic, or Lord” argument about whether Jesus was speaking truth when he claimed to be the divine Lord of the universe. He said things like, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58), and, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). The argument for his truth goes like this: “Christ either deceived mankind by conscious fraud, or He was Himself deluded and self-deceived, or He was Divine. There is no getting out of this trilemma. It is inexorable” (John Duncan, *Colloquia Peripatetica*). Liar. Lunatic. Or Lord.

In other words, the argument implies that if you find it difficult to call Jesus a liar or a lunatic, you are being led, therefore, to see him as Lord. In recent times, however, the argument has been complicated by the fact that some add a fourth possibility: legend. Liar. Lunatic. Lord. Or legend. In other words, maybe Jesus did not really say the things the New Testament records. Maybe that portrayal is legend.

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/liar-lunatic-or-reliable> . Accessed 12/8/23 @ 10am.

There are good reasons against the view that the Jesus of the New Testament Gospels is a legend. I tried to give some of those reasons in my book *What Jesus Demands from the World*. My new book [*Why I Love the Apostle Paul: 30 Reasons*], however, is about Paul. No one seriously considers that Paul is a legend. Or, to be more specific, no historical scholar I am aware of seriously thinks that we do not meet the real, historical Paul in his letters. Even the most skeptical scholars, who deny Paul's authorship of five or six of his thirteen letters, believe the real, historical Paul is visible in the New Testament portrait.

This means that the argument (liar, lunatic, or Lord) has a very important application to Paul. Paul does not claim to be anybody's lord. In fact, he disclaims it (2 Corinthians 1:24). But he does claim to be an authoritative and truthful apostle — an authorized representative and spokesman — for Jesus Christ, whom he says has been raised from the dead and is reigning over the universe and will come again in glory (Galatians 1:1, 11–16; 1 Corinthians 14:37–38; 15:1–9, 20–25; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17).

These, of course, are crazy claims — unless they are true. So with regard to Paul we have a real trilemma. Paul was either (1) a fraud who knew his message was untrue but used religion for some ulterior reason (liar), or (2) deluded (on a par with a lunatic), or (3) an authorized and truthful spokesman for the risen Lord, Jesus Christ.

During the six decades that I have believed in Jesus, I have, from time to time, tried to step back and ask myself, as honestly as I can: Why do you believe? How can you have the confidence to build your whole life around the truth of what Paul teaches? Three years ago, I wrote a whole book to answer this question — *A Peculiar Glory*. But here's a short answer: I cannot with any sincerity consider Paul a liar or a lunatic. I cannot see him as a deceiver or deceived. He has won my trust.

How does that happen? It usually doesn't happen overnight. It comes from *knowing* a person. But knowing a person usually takes time. And coming to know a complex, many-faceted person may be slow and difficult. Such a person, over time, will prove to be a tangle of confusion and contradiction, or will prove to be a person of integrity and profound consistency. Paul is not confused. He is not duplicitous. He is not trying to be one of what he calls "people-pleasers" (Ephesians 6:6). He does not need my approval. He doesn't fear my rejection. He does not have his finger in the air to discern how the winds of culture are blowing. He is authentic.

I have found that the criteria for discerning that someone is not a lunatic or a liar overlap with the criteria for love. In other words, the traits that show a person to be mentally whole and morally honest are the same traits that awaken admiration and affection and appreciation. This is why I have written about my love for Paul. The pilgrimage of coming to love him and coming to credit him have been one pilgrimage.

I owe my life to the gospel of Jesus — and no one has taken me deeper into the mysteries of the gospel than Paul. After the Lord Jesus himself, no one has won my appreciation and admiration more. And these are rooted in the very things that make a person trustworthy. They are a real validation.

The book² is not anything like a comprehensive overview of Paul's thought. It is highly personal, and even idiosyncratic. That is, it reflects my own peculiar pilgrimage and passions. If you love Paul and make your own list of reasons why you do, it could be very different from mine without being wrong. These different lists would not be a mark of Paul's inconsistencies. They may be a mark of his greatness.

My aim is not to establish the definitive list of Paul's authenticating traits. My aim is to commend Paul as a trustworthy witness. I believe that the reasons I love him, taken together, are a compelling case that he is not a liar or a lunatic. I want you to be deeply and joyfully persuaded that he is admirable and trustworthy and that what he writes is true.

Paul is not God. He is not the highest authority. Only Christ is the Himalayan touchstone. Christ never sinned! Paul shares not only my humanity, but also my *sinful* humanity. But, oh, what heights of greatness and Godwardness he attained — most of it through suffering! I love him for the Christ he shows me. I love him for the unsearchable riches of truth he opens to me. I love him for the constellation of his own personal excellencies, which are all the more compelling because of how diverse, even paradoxical, they are.

I welcome you to share my admiration — and my love — for the apostle Paul. And he would be very displeased if I did not pray that in this way, you would see and trust his Lord Jesus as your Savior, and Lord, and the supreme Treasure of your life.

² <https://www.desiringgod.org/books/why-i-love-the-apostle-paul> . Accessed 12/8/23 @ 10:15am.