

"ON HAVING THE RIGHT CREDENTIALS"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

When in grade school, a man was told that if he wanted to get a good job, he had to graduate from High School. So he went to High School and graduated. While in High School, he was told that if he really wanted to get a good job, he should go to college and so he went on to college and graduated! Just before graduation, he was told that just about everybody had a Bachelor's Degree and in order to get a really high paying job, he should get a Master's Degree. He went on and got his Master's Degree. Then he was told one day by someone who knew that a Master's Degree would only take him so far and that he should really work on a Doctorate. So, one day he was given his Doctorate and went out to find a job, whereupon, he was told that they were looking for younger men. And so it goes...

THE RIGHT CREDENTIALS

Yes, it's so important to have the right credentials. Employers want to know that you've been to the right school, that you've gotten a proper education. As someone has said, "The tassel is worth the hassle". And people without the proper credentials have been known to do untold of harm.

For instance, I read about a young Californian who told the parents of his girlfriend that he was a pilot and he offered to fly them to Las Vegas. Without any further verification, the family boarded what later turned out to be a stolen plane. The plane left the ground, flew thirty feet into the air and then nose-dived into a warehouse, killing everyone on board. Authorities later said that the boy had flown with a pilot, but had no license or authority to fly solo. Credentials are important....society's way of protecting itself from incompetents.

I love the story about Billie Burke, the famous actress. She was enjoying herself on a trans-Atlantic ocean trip and noticed that a gentleman at the next table was suffering from a very bad cold. She asked him sympathetically,

"Are you uncomfortable?" The man nodded that he was whereupon she said, "I'll tell you what to do....go back to your room and drink lots of orange juice and take two aspirin. Cover yourself with all the blankets you can find. Sweat the cold out. I know just what I'm talking about. I'm Billie Burke from Hollywood..."

The man smiled and introduced himself in return, saying, "Thank you. I'm Dr. Mayo from the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota."

Credentials can protect us from charlatans and incompetents. We want to know that our pilot is licensed, also our doctor, our accountant, our realtor, even our beautician. We want to know that our lawyer has been admitted to the bar and that our pastor has been properly ordained. Credentials are important.

PAUL AND HIS CREDENTIALS

Turning to the New Testament and to today's scripture passage, we note right away that Paul, the Apostle, was continually having to establish his credentials....which seems a bit absurd for after all more than anyone else Paul was responsible for the spread of the Christian faith throughout the known world of his day.

We think about St. Paul at this time of the year, remembering that on December 25th, we celebrate the birth of a child, but that on January the 25th, the Christian world pauses to celebrate the "re-birth" of a man - the conversion of Paul to the Christian faith on the road leading in to Damascus.

You know his story and how he persecuted the early Christians, but then one day he met Christ and his life, as a result, was radically changed. From your Sunday School lessons you know that he went on to become the great missionary to the Gentile world. Much of our New Testament, and indeed, much of our theology comes from letters Paul wrote to those little churches - the Church at Rom, the Church at Corinth. Surely, this man had such a forceful impact that it was not necessary for him to continually establish his credentials, but he did. He begins most of his letters by establishing his credentials, as he did in his letter to the Coriathians.

"Paul...called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus
by the will of God and our brother, Sosthenes,
to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those
who are sanctified in Christ..."

There were times when he changed his credentials around, probably depending on just how others viewed him. If Paul is writing to a church where his authority is "in question", he identifies himself as Paul, "An Apostle". He is reminding them of his credentials, of his "holy calling". On the other hand, if he is writing to a church that has full confidence in his ministry, he refers to himself simply as Paul. In this letter to the Corinthians, he quickly identifies himself as an Apostle. Apparently it was necessary for him to add a bit of weight at the beginning. But the point is that Paul knew that it was most important that he take the time and trouble to establish his credentials.

FIRST CREDENTIAL: HIS CALLING

What were they. What were Paul's credentials? What gave him the authority to speak for Christ. The first credential, of course, was his CALLING. Note how he begins.

"Paul....called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ"

Called, that is. Studs Terkel, the writer, once said something that most of us, I think, will go with...agree with. Said he,

"I think most of us are looking for a calling, not a job. Most of us, like the assembly line worker, have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Most jobs are not big enough for people".

And my guess is that this is true. We all want to believe that there is more to life than our jobs....and that God has more in mind for us than that 9 to 5 daily routine. We'd like to believe that we have a "calling"...that calling may be synonymous with our job, as mine is as a pastor. Or, it may be a calling much larger than our job. The call to love our family...to be the world's greatest Dad, or the world's Number One Mom. The call to serve our community. The call to a ministry in our church. So put this down first as Paul's first of four credentials. He felt very strongly and very deeply that he had been called.

SECOND CREDENTIAL: A CHANGED LIFE

There's a second credential that should receive our attention. And this was the credential of a changed life. People are "called" by God every day, but so few really respond. And fewer still have their lives changed like Paul's life was changed. From a persecutor of the faithful, to a protector of the same.

Paul's story reminds of the story of Gary Adams's life. Gary, they said, didn't have much need for God growing up down in Asheville, North Carolina. Oh, he attended Sunday School as a child and he grew up with the basics of the faith, but as he reached adulthood, he began to wander away from the fold, and really didn't have a need for a higher power in his life. To him, as he once told a friend, God was "irrelevant" to his life, but he did get along with a couple of buddies, co-workers, both of whom were enthusiastic church men and strong in their faith commitment.

All three men had a sense of adventure...that they had in common. Three years ago, they went "caving" in western North Carolina...just before Christmas. Nantahala Gorge was where it "happened" to Gary. Exploring a waterfall hidden deep in one of the caves, Gary lost his footing while clinging a rope ladder. He fell something like 50 feet to the floor of that cave. When he came to, he didn't know where he was and worse than that, he didn't know who he was. Confused. Alone. His companions left to get help. But as he lay there on the damp and cold floor of that cave, he started to pray....and he tells us that he knew without a doubt that God was there with him. He prayed,

"Lord...let me live long enough to find out who I am and what my life is all about...."

He writes that a great peace came over him, that he suddenly felt complete. And when the paramedics finally reached Gary, hours later, one of them said his name and suddenly Gary's memory returned...completely. The Gary Adams who came out of that cave was not the same Gary Adams who had gone in to it. He felt he was now a man who belonged completely to God, but, as he wrote of this experience, he had to forget himself, quite literally, before he could realize who God really is. It was the kind of turn-about that Paul experienced. And it's tough to argue with a life that has been radically changed. To me, it's one of the credentials of a Christian....a calling from God and then a life radically changed. But there are two more credentials I want to put before you.

THIRD CREDENTIAL: A STRONG CHARACTER

St. Paul also had the credential of a strong character. Paul makes use of one of those great religious words that we don't often hear now-a-days...the word "sanctified". Sanctified means "set apart from God". Back in Old Testament times, sanctified persons and places and things were never used for profane or ordinary purposes. And no one ever accused Paul of being profane or ordinary. In other words, character counted as far as Paul was concerned.

Writing in his book, Finish Strong, Richard G. Capen, captures the attention of his reader with these thoughts...

"One of the reasons for the decline of the American spirit is a pervasive loss of trust. Everywhere we

look, we find evidence that no one trusts anyone anymore.....if you think that's an exaggeration, take a look at the ceiling or toward the corner of your local supermarket. Chances are you'll spot a security camera. We no longer seal marriage with a kiss. Instead, we sign prenuptial agreements, sometimes at the altar as part of the actual marriage ceremony. Banks delay clearing checks because they don't trust their customers. Hospitals refuse to accept patients because they are afraid they won't get paid. Are we all really that dishonest?" Carpen asks.

"Evidently we are. In the field of medicine, researchers at the University of Pittsburgh recently found that up to 20 percent of its doctor applicants for training fellowships lied about their research credentials. Moreover, 30 percent said they had published articles in journals that didn't even exist". (A question: would you want any of those people carving you up?)

"But doctors aren't the only culprits. Recently, the Reader's Digest dropped 120 wallets, each containing fifty dollars in cash, on the streets of 12 large and small cities across the land. Its purpose, of course, was to test the honesty in America. About 67 percent of the 'lost' wallets were returned...indicating that, according to this un-scientific measure, we are about 67 per cent honest. Not a bad measure of trust either. How would you feel about someone who finds fifty dollars on the street and keeps it? How trustworthy would you think that person is?"

"Several years ago the Roper organization surveyed the public about its perceptions of 'who's' telling the truth. In this study, people said that the clergy told the truth 49% of the time, doctors 48%, their best friend 26%, the local newspaper 8%, the President of the United States, 8% and leaders of Congress 3%. What a terrible indictment of our system. By the way, asks the author, where would you rate yourself on truthfulness? What percentage of the time do you tell the truth?"

Paul had the credentials of a "calling" by God, and he also showed a "radically changed" life, and third, he had a "rock-steady" character. But one more credential to lift up before he close up and head home.

FOURTH CREDENTIAL: COMMITMENT TO CHRIST

Christ. Others called by God might fall by the wayside, but not Paul. He was "in there" for the long haul. He had trusted his life to God and he was not turning back.

Finally Paul had the credential of an unfailing commitment to

Says Lawrence Richards,

"In rock climbing, there's something called a commitment move.....

"You're tied to the ropes and there's a moment when you're standing and have to let go of the solid ground to move to the next higher place. It's a terribly scary step. You must trust what you're tied to more than what you're standing on...."

And Richards continues,

"Jesus offers us the same lesson. What you're tied to is so much greater than the little bit you're standing on. The ONE to whom you're connected is far greater than any circumstance in your life."

That's beautiful. I like it and, of course, it leads to this question: have you made that kind of commitment to Christ, to the ONE in whom we see life's highest hopes? - as well as its deepest meaning? The kind that St. Paul made. And when you do, you will find that,

"What you're tied to is so much greater than the little bit you're standing on".

All right then...as we celebrate the "re-birth" of a man this day, we have been listing "his" credentials...credentials, really, that every serious follower of Jesus should carry. What are they again?

- First: A sense that God has a calling for you.
- Second: A radical change of life as you seek to become what God has called you to be.
- Third: A rock-hard character that cannot be shaken, chapped, no matter what.
- Fourth: A lifelong commitment to walk in the steps of Jesus, as did Paul.

Credentials are so important. Check yours. When some day you stand there before "your Maker", what are the credentials you will have to offer, to show?

PRAYER

Once again, dear God, make each of us sensitive to Your presence, your nearness, your peace and power at work in our lives....wrestle with us as you once wrestled with Paul...down before the surface of our lives where the shadows of less than we might be sometimes darken our lives....help us to carry the right credentials with us...ready to show them when necessary as we travel along the road of life. In the spirit of Jesus and in the example of Paul, we now pray. Amen.