

CHIEF OF SINNERS

Chief of sinners though I be Jesus shed His blood for me
Died that I might live on high.... Lives that I might never die
As the branch is to the vine.... I am His and He is mine.

Chief of sinners. We say it. We sing it. We hold it in our heads as a truth of the Bible. We don't deserve God's grace. We are steeped in selfishness and greed, jealousy and anger. We want to give up our sinful image and be conformed to the image of Christ. It's our line in the Christian Church, isn't it? It's what we say every week. "Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways to the glory of your holy name." We don't want to be Phil Hillenbrand (or whatever your name is) – because we recognize that Phil Hillenbrand is stuck in the mire of sin. No, we want to become like Jesus. Sounds great, doesn't it?

So here's my question: is it really true? Do we really believe that we are the chief of sinners? Are we really ready to acknowledge our own imperfections, flaws, sins and faults?

In truth, in a practical way, most people probably act somewhat differently. Let me show you what I mean using some pretend examples.

That President Obama, he doesn't make the choices and decisions I think he should. His health care plan, his vision for America. I think, well, I think the whole thing should be different. He should be --- well.... more like me.

That man at the grocery store who butted in front of me in line. What a selfish person. Doesn't he realize that the rest of us have been waiting too – that we want to be through with our shopping as quickly and efficiently as possible. He should be... well... more like me. I wouldn't do that.

That boss of mine is soooo... controlling. And she wields her position like a sword. I hate the way she treats her employees. I hate the way she runs the store. I hate the fact that she is so smug and self-righteous – about everything. She...she should be more... like me.

That lady in front of me in church – her children run the show. Those teens don't pay attention. She lets them do anything they want, make all kinds of noise, disturb everyone and everything. She should raise them ... more ... like I would.

That brother of mine who mom chose to be the executor of her will. Look at him. The way he's treating mom is shameful. I can't believe he's putting her in a home. I can't believe he's jockeying himself to get the better share of her estate. He needs to be ... more ... like... me.

Let's face it. Sometimes the refrain is a bit more like:

Chief of sinners I may be... but I'm not quite as bad as she.
I'm not perfect, but I'm pretty good, especially when I'm in the mood.
God is pleased with all I do, and He'll be proud when I am through.

This also, by the way, was the refrain of St. Paul prior to his conversion. A Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee of Pharisees, he looked out at all those Jews who were embracing the Gospel of Christ and he said to himself, "look at all those fools. They've been charmed by a charlatan. They've been entranced by a pretender. He wasn't the Messiah. He was just a man who died on a cross. Those Jews, and everyone else. They need to be more ... like... me. They need to see through Him. They need to live holy lives. They need to follow the rites, rituals, and rules of Israel, not put their lives into the hands of some blasphemmer."

And Paul took his pride and self-righteousness a step further. As a religious leader in a position of authority, he set out to bring an end to the Christian movement. He traveled throughout the land rounding up Christians for persecution, singing:

Chief of sinners I am not, but the sinners I will get
They'll regret their thoughts misguided, In my hands they will be chided
Force them to believe like me, that's the way that it should be.

You see, Paul was horribly misguided when he was the murderous, threatening Saul of Tarsus. And here's the thing: he THOUGHT he was faithful. He thought he was doing the right thing, living the right way, pleasing God by the way he acted.

Thanks be to God, that in the middle of Saul's tirade and self-righteousness, there was a loving Savior even for him. A Savior who declared, "I want that man as my instrument. I love that man far more than he hates me and my followers. And so, in grace, I will intervene. I will forgive him, renew him, and lead him, so that he may delight in my will and walk in my ways to the glory of my holy name."

And as Saul headed out to do his worst, Jesus Christ knocked him off his horse with a bright light and said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me." Blinded for a few days, he came to believe in Jesus as his Savior. And when he did, scales literally fell off his eyes. From that point onward he was a changed man – truly changed. Once self-righteous, he now declares in our text: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen."

And Paul's desire, then, was not for people to be cast in his own image, but for them to be conformed to the image of Christ -- to be molded and shaped by the Holy Spirit into loving, gentle, patient, generous followers of Him who gave His life for all.

What about you? With which eyes do you see the people around you in the world? Do you want to cast them into your image or would you rather see them become like Him whose love transformed the world?

In the year 1977, Sylvester Stallone commissioned a statue of himself, as Rocky Balboa, with arms raised above his head. The statue was placed at the top of the Art Museum steps for the filming of the movie Rocky II. When he finished filming, with the permission of the city, he left the statue there as his gift to the city.

It wasn't long, however, before City officials said, "We don't want a movie prop to be the face of Philly. We don't want our image to be that of a movie star in a role. And so, they removed the statue and placed it, instead, in a less prominent place. They didn't want the city cast into the mold of Rocky Balboa.

And that's how it should be with us, my friends. Like St. Paul, we ARE the chief of sinners, like it or not. We have sinned against Him in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. And so, as we look around us, it should not be our goal to cast others in our image, but instead for them, and us, to be transformed by the renewal of their hearts, to the image of Christ. To know Him, to love Him, to serve Him and follow Him – and Him alone.

The very first sin in the history of the world was when Eve decided she wanted to become a god unto herself. And Adam followed. And so did the rest of us.

But on the cross Jesus recast the image and said, “Whoever believes in Me, streams of living water will flow from within him.” And when those waters flow, we see people with different eyes. Eyes that see not their evils and failures and sins and faults, hearts that yield not to our own desire for everyone to agree with our opinion and do things the way we would, but who choose, instead, to see the diversity faces as all people for whom Christ died – as people who may, by His grace, be invested with the gift of the Holy Spirit and be led, by Him, to serve into the family of faith. That is our greatest desire – not for them to be like us – but for all of us to be LIKE HIM.

And so we say, one more time, and may it be true in us:

Chief of sinners though I be
Jesus shed His blood for me
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Lives that I might never die
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