

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: Saul the Persecutor: Zeal Without Knowledge

Acts 8:1–3; Philippians 3:4–6

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This first lesson sets the stage for the entire study by showing us who Saul was before grace found him. The historical setting is the aftermath of Stephen's martyrdom, around A.D. 34, when a fierce persecution scattered the Jerusalem church and Saul of Tarsus emerged as its most aggressive opponent. Luke deliberately introduces Saul as the man holding the coats at Stephen's stoning (Acts 7:58; 8:1), then describes him "ravaging the church" and dragging believers to prison (Acts 8:3). Paul's own testimony in Philippians 3:4–6 fills in the picture from the inside: he was a credentialed, law-keeping, blameless Pharisee, sincere and zealous to the core. The doctrinal point at stake is enormous and easily missed. Here is a man who had everything religion could offer, sincerity, zeal, pedigree, moral performance, and was still lost and at war with God. That truth strikes directly at the popular notion that a good, sincere, religious person is automatically right with God.

Be careful not to caricature Saul as a villain who knew he was doing evil. The far more useful, and more frightening, truth is that he believed he was serving God. His conscience was clear. He was doing what his theology told him was right. This is precisely why he is such a powerful warning. Sincerity is not the same as truth, and zeal is only as good as the knowledge that guides it. Paul himself later diagnosed his old condition: "they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (Romans 10:2). The lesson is aiming to dismantle the false security that says, "I mean well, so I must be fine," and to replace it with a humble dependence on the truth God has revealed in Christ.

This lesson is also aiming at the heart of the student, not merely the head. Most members of your class will never persecute a church, but nearly all of them are tempted to trust in some version of Saul's resume: their upbringing, their morality, their service, their knowledge. Press the question gently but honestly. Help them see that the same self-righteousness that blinded Saul can quietly operate in respectable, churchgoing people, and that the only cure is to count it all as loss for the sake of Christ. Aim to send students home both warned and hopeful, warned about the danger of zeal without knowledge, and hopeful because the chief of sinners became the apostle to the Gentiles by the grace they too have received.

Question 1

Student Question:

Luke records that "Saul approved of his execution" (Acts 8:1), and then that "Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed

them to prison” (Acts 8:3). What does this opening portrait reveal about the seriousness and intensity of Saul’s opposition to Christ and His church, and why does it matter that the man God would later use began here?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by letting the text do its full work. Luke does not soften Saul’s role. The same Saul who stood guard over the executioners’ cloaks (Acts 7:58) is now described as “ravaging” the church. The Greek word pictures the violent destruction a wild beast inflicts on a body, and it is no accident that Luke chooses it. Saul was not a passive bystander or a reluctant participant. He was the driving force of the persecution, going “house after house,” hunting believers in the places they thought were safe.

Notice the detail “men and women.” Saul made no exceptions. He dragged mothers and wives to prison alongside the men. This was systematic, personal, and merciless. In his later confessions Paul says he “persecuted this Way to the death” (Acts 22:4) and “tried to make them blaspheme” (Acts 26:11). The man we will watch become the great apostle started as the church’s public enemy number one.

Help students feel the weight of why this matters. First, it magnifies grace. If God can save and use this man, no one is beyond His reach. Second, it underlines that opposition to the church was opposition to Christ Himself. When Jesus later confronts Saul, He does not say, “Why do you persecute my people?” but “Why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). To touch the church is to touch the Lord.

Finally, this opening guards us against sentimentalizing conversion. Saul did not drift toward Christ; he was running hard in the opposite direction. The story we are about to study is not a story of a good man getting a little better. It is a story of an enemy being conquered by grace. Setting that baseline clearly now will make every later lesson land with more force.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The reality and seriousness of sin, even religious sin done in good conscience
- Persecution of the church as opposition to Christ Himself (Acts 9:4)
- The magnitude of grace measured against the magnitude of the sinner it saves
- Conversion as a rescue of enemies, not the improvement of the already good
- God’s sovereign ability to redeem and use those who once fought Him

Discussion Prompts

- What words would you have used to describe Saul if you had been a believer in Jerusalem that day?
- Why does Luke take such care to show us Saul at his worst before showing us grace?
- How does it change the way we pray for hostile people to remember where Saul started?

Question 2

Student Question:

It is sobering that religious zeal drove Saul to harm the very people of God. Where might zeal in your own life be aimed at the wrong target, defending your opinions, winning arguments, or controlling outcomes, rather than serving Christ and loving people? Name one place where your passion needs to be re-aimed.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first self-examining question, and the aim is honesty rather than information. Saul's zeal was not a small thing; it was the engine of his life. The danger is not having passion but pointing it in the wrong direction. Help students see that misdirected zeal often feels righteous from the inside. Saul felt he was defending God's honor while he was wounding God's people.

Bring this down to ordinary life. Zeal goes wrong when we become more committed to being right than to being loving, more eager to win the argument than to win the person, more invested in controlling an outcome than in trusting God. Religious people are especially prone to this, because the cause feels holy and the collateral damage feels justified.

Encourage students to name one concrete arena: a strained relationship where they have been more interested in proving a point, a position they defend with more heat than grace, a corner of family or church life where their need to control has quietly hurt people. The goal is not to extinguish zeal but to submit it to Christ and aim it where He aims it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between zeal for God and zeal aimed at the wrong target
- Loving people as the test of whether our passion is Christlike (1 Corinthians 13:1–3)
- The self-deception of feeling righteous while harming others
- Submitting strong convictions to the lordship and the love of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you confused being right with being righteous?
- Who in your life has been hurt by zeal that was aimed in the wrong direction?
- What would it look like this week to keep your convictions but change your tone?

Question 3

Student Question:

In Philippians 3:4–6 Paul lists the things he once counted as gain: “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee.”

Why did Paul once put confidence in these credentials, and what do they tell us about the kind of righteousness that cannot make a person right with God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Walk through the list so students see that Saul had every advantage Judaism could confer. Some of it was inherited, his circumcision on the eighth day exactly as the law required, his pure Israelite descent, his membership in the honored tribe of Benjamin, his upbringing as a Hebrew of Hebrews. Some of it was achieved, his rigorous training as a Pharisee, the strictest party of the Jews. Birth and effort combined to produce a man who, on paper, could not be improved.

Paul calls this “confidence in the flesh” (Philippians 3:3–4). “Flesh” here means everything a person can be or do apart from Christ, the whole pile of human credentials and achievements we lean on for standing before God. The tragedy is that this very pile became a substitute for the righteousness God gives. Saul trusted what he was and what he had done.

The teaching point is that this kind of righteousness, however impressive, cannot save. Paul will go on to say he counts it all as “rubbish” compared to knowing Christ and being found in Him “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ” (Philippians 3:8–9). There are two kinds of righteousness in view: one we manufacture and one we receive. Only the second one saves.

Be careful to make the right contrast for our setting. Paul is not pitting faith against obedience to God. He is pitting confidence in self against confidence in Christ. The obedient faith that receives Christ in repentance, confession, and baptism is not part of the “rubbish” Paul discards; it is how a person comes to be “found in him.” What Paul renounces is the boast that his pedigree and law-keeping earned him a standing before God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Two kinds of righteousness: one we produce, one we receive from God in Christ
- “Confidence in the flesh” as trusting in human credentials and achievement
- Religious heritage and morality cannot, by themselves, justify a sinner
- Justification grounded in Christ and received through obedient faith, not earned by merit
- The pride that hides inside an impressive religious resume

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between a righteousness we build and one we receive?
- Why is a religious resume so dangerous to trust in?
- How does the gospel free us from having to earn our standing before God?

Question 4

Student Question:

Make your own honest list. What would go on your “confidence in the flesh” resume, the things you are quietly tempted to trust in, such as your background, your reputation, your good deeds, or your record of service? What would it cost you to count those things as loss compared to knowing Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Invite students to do exactly what Paul did, write the list. Many will be surprised how easily it comes: a Christian upbringing, years of faithful attendance, a clean moral record, a respected name, hours of service. None of these are bad. The problem is the quiet trust we place in them, the way they become the real foundation of our confidence before God.

Help students feel the cost of counting these things as loss. Paul did not say his advantages were worthless in themselves; he said he reckoned them as loss “for the sake of Christ.” It costs something to stop leaning on your record and lean wholly on Jesus, because our identity gets tangled up in our achievements. The goal is not to despise good things but to dethrone them.

Press toward a concrete response. Ask each student to identify the one item on their list they are most tempted to trust, and to consciously hand it over to Christ this week, holding it as a gift rather than a wage, and resting their hope on the Savior rather than the resume.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The subtle drift from trusting Christ to trusting our record of service
- Counting our advantages as loss “for the sake of Christ” (Philippians 3:7–8)
- Identity rooted in Christ rather than in achievement or reputation
- Good things become dangerous things when they become the ground of our hope

Discussion Prompts

- Which item on your list are you most tempted to lean on?
- What feels frightening about counting your achievements as loss?
- How would resting in Christ change the way you face a bad week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul later wrote of his own people, “they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge” (Romans 10:2). How does Saul’s life show that zeal and sincerity, however intense, are not enough when they are not grounded in the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Romans 10:2 is Paul’s own autopsy of his former life, and it is one of the most important diagnostic verses in Scripture. He grants that the zeal is real, “for God,” not for self. He does not

question their sincerity. He locates the failure precisely: it was “not according to knowledge.” Their problem was not a lack of passion but a lack of truth, specifically, ignorance of “the righteousness of God” and a determination to establish their own (Romans 10:3).

Apply this carefully. Our culture treats sincerity as the highest virtue, as though meaning it makes it so. Saul was the living refutation of that idea. He was utterly sincere and utterly wrong, and his sincerity made him more dangerous, not less. A sincere lie is still a lie. A zealous error is still an error, and it can do tremendous harm.

This is also a strong place to affirm the authority of revealed truth. Zeal must be governed by knowledge, and that knowledge is not whatever feels right to us but what God has actually said, supremely in Christ and in the inspired Scriptures. The remedy for Saul’s condition was not less zeal but true knowledge of the Lord he was unknowingly fighting.

Without turning the lesson into a different study, you can gently note where this principle bites today. Many sincere, zealous religious teachings simply do not match what the New Testament says. Sincerity does not make them true, and following them sincerely will not make a person right with God. The standard is the revealed word, not the strength of our feelings.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sincerity is not the test of truth; the revealed word of God is
- Zeal must be governed by accurate knowledge of God in Christ
- Ignorance of God’s righteousness and the impulse to establish our own (Romans 10:3)
- The authority of Scripture over human feeling and intuition
- Earnest religious error is still error, and it carries real consequences

Discussion Prompts

- Why do we tend to treat sincerity as if it guarantees we are right?
- How can a person tell whether their zeal is according to knowledge?
- Where have you seen sincere but mistaken belief do real damage?

Question 6

Student Question:

Most of us assume that meaning well is enough, that God surely accepts a sincere heart. Where have you leaned on your good intentions as if they settled the matter? In what area do you most need to test your zeal against the actual teaching of Scripture rather than your own feelings?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the truth of Romans 10:2 onto the student’s own assumptions. We almost all carry an unspoken theology that says, “If my heart is in the right place, the details do not

matter.” Saul’s story is a direct challenge to that comfortable idea. Help students name the places where they have settled an important question simply by checking their intentions rather than the Scriptures.

Move toward the discipline of testing. A mature faith does not just feel its way forward; it checks its convictions against the word of God. Encourage students to identify one belief or practice they have never actually examined biblically, something they hold mainly because it feels right or because they have always done it that way.

Be pastoral here. The point is not to make people anxious about every decision but to cultivate a humble willingness to be corrected by Scripture. The same teachable spirit that Saul lacked, and later gained, is what keeps our zeal from running off the road.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Good intentions are not a substitute for conformity to God’s revealed will
- The discipline of testing our convictions by Scripture (Acts 17:11)
- A teachable spirit as the safeguard against zeal without knowledge
- Humility to be corrected by the word rather than defended by our feelings

Discussion Prompts

- What is one belief you hold mainly because it feels right to you?
- How do you respond when Scripture contradicts something you assumed?
- What helps you stay teachable rather than defensive?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul says that “as to righteousness under the law” he was “blameless” (Philippians 3:6), and yet at that very time he was lost and fighting God. What does this teach us about the limits of law-keeping, moral performance, and outward religion for putting us right with God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a striking claim and worth lingering over. Paul does not say he kept the law perfectly in the absolute sense; elsewhere he confesses he was the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). He means that by the external, measurable standards of Pharisaic righteousness, no one could lay a charge against him. He tithed, he fasted, he kept the rules, he looked the part. And it was not enough.

Here is the lesson: outward conformity to rules can leave the heart untouched and the person unsaved. Saul could be blameless on the outside and a persecutor of Christ at the same time.

The law could regulate his behavior, but it could not give him the righteousness God requires, nor could it expose to him the Lord he was opposing until grace intervened.

Connect this to the broader gospel. The law was never designed to save; it was designed to reveal sin and point us to Christ (Romans 3:20; Galatians 3:24). Anyone who hopes to be justified by law-keeping has misunderstood both the law and themselves. This is the very error Paul spent his ministry confronting, and it began as his own.

Apply it to the present. Plenty of people today are “blameless” by their own standard, decent, dependable, religiously observant, and they assume that record will commend them to God. Saul shows that it will not. We do not need a slightly better moral performance; we need a righteousness we cannot manufacture, received through faith in Christ. This sets up beautifully for the next lesson, where grace stops the blameless persecutor in his tracks.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- External law-keeping cannot produce the righteousness God requires
- Outward religion can coexist with a heart still at war with God
- The true purpose of the law: to reveal sin and lead us to Christ (Galatians 3:24)
- The futility of seeking justification by our moral performance (Romans 3:20)
- The need for a received righteousness, not an achieved one

Discussion Prompts

- How can someone be “blameless” by outward standards and still be lost?
- What was the law actually designed to do?
- Why is moral decency not the same as being right with God?

Question 8

Student Question:

Saul measured himself against the law and came out looking blameless, which fed his pride. Where do you tend to measure yourself against other people or against your own standards in a way that leaves you feeling secure and superior? How does Saul’s example expose the danger in that habit?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Self-righteousness almost always depends on a comparison. We choose a standard we can meet, or a person we can outperform, and then we rest in the favorable result. Saul did this with the law, and it left him confident and proud. Help students notice the comparisons they run, often unconsciously, that prop up their sense of standing.

The danger is twofold. First, comparison blinds us to our real condition before God, because we are looking sideways at other people instead of upward at His holiness. Second, it breeds contempt; the self-righteous heart looks down on others, exactly as the Pharisee did in Jesus' parable (Luke 18:9–14). Saul's superiority made him capable of cruelty toward those he judged.

Guide students toward the humility of the gospel. The ground at the foot of the cross is level. When our confidence rests in Christ rather than in being better than someone else, comparison loses its grip and compassion can grow in its place. Ask each student to name one comparison they need to lay down this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-righteousness depends on a chosen standard or a favorable comparison
- Comparison blinds us to our true condition before a holy God
- The link between self-righteousness and contempt for others (Luke 18:9–14)
- The leveling humility of grace at the foot of the cross

Discussion Prompts

- Who or what do you measure yourself against to feel secure?
- How does comparison quietly produce contempt for other people?
- What changes when your confidence rests in Christ rather than in being better than someone?

Question 9

Student Question:

Saul was as religious, as moral, and as sincere as a human being could be, and still he was without Christ and needed to be saved. What does this say to the common belief that a sincere, good, religious person must surely be accepted by God? According to the gospel, what does a person actually need in order to be made right with God, and why can no resume of our own ever substitute for it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson, and it deserves the most time. Saul is the definitive case against the popular gospel of “good, sincere people go to heaven.” If sincerity could save, Saul was saved. If moral performance could save, Saul, blameless under the law, was saved. If religious heritage could save, the Hebrew of Hebrews was saved. He had all of it, and Jesus still had to stop him on the Damascus road and send him to be told what he “must do” (Acts 9:6). The verdict of the text is unmistakable: none of it was enough.

State the positive truth plainly. A person is made right with God not by accumulating a resume but by responding to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Salvation is by the grace of God, received

through a faith that obeys. Saul's own conversion, which we will study next, lays out the pattern in living color: he heard the Lord, believed and submitted to Him as Lord, repented in three days of prayer and fasting, and was told, "rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). His sins were washed away not by his pedigree, and not the instant he believed on the road, but when he obeyed the gospel in baptism.

Be clear about what is being rejected and what is not. We are not saying good works, morality, or sincerity are worthless; we are saying they cannot earn or replace salvation. And we are emphatically not replacing one resume (law-keeping) with a different boast ("I prayed a prayer" or "I just believe"). The gospel is not "faith only" any more than it is "works only." It is grace received through an obedient faith that hears, believes, repents, confesses Christ, and is baptized into Him (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27).

Help the teacher hold the tension well. The same Paul who renounced confidence in the flesh is the one who said, "what shall I do, Lord?" and then did it. Trusting Christ is not passivity; it is surrender that obeys. A sincere, moral, religious person still needs to come to Christ on Christ's terms, just as Saul did. No one is so good that they may skip the gospel, and no one is so bad that the gospel cannot reach them.

Land the application with both warning and hope. Warn the comfortable: a fine reputation and a sincere heart will not stand in the place of obedience to Christ. Comfort the struggling: if grace could reclaim the man ravaging the church, it can reach anyone in the room. The point is never to win an argument but to move every student to rest entirely on Christ and to respond to Him as Saul finally did.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sincerity, morality, and religious heritage cannot save apart from Christ
- Salvation is by grace, received through an obedient faith, not by a human resume
- The biblical pattern of response: hearing, faith, repentance, confession, baptism (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27)
- A clear rejection of salvation by "faith only" as much as by "works only"
- Saul's sins washed away at baptism, not earned by his record (Acts 22:16)
- No one is too good to need the gospel and no one is too far gone for grace
- The danger of substituting a clear conscience for actual obedience to Christ

Discussion Prompts

- If sincerity and morality could save, what would Saul's story look like?
- How would you lovingly answer a friend who says, "I'm a good person, so I'll be fine"?
- What does it mean to trust Christ in a way that actually obeys Him?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this portrait of Saul, the approving witness at Stephen's death, the man ravaging the church, the flawless Pharisee confident in his record. Name one specific way you sense Jesus using this picture to form you, whether to soften pride, to re-aim misguided zeal, or to move your trust off your own record and onto Him. What is the one truth from Saul's story you most need to carry into this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the whole lesson and asks for a personal response. Resist the urge to add new content; instead, help students name what God has already pressed on them. The three threads of the lesson, pride, misdirected zeal, and misplaced confidence, give them concrete categories to choose from.

Encourage specificity. "I need more humility" is true but vague. "I need to stop using my years in church as my reason to feel secure, and start each day resting in Christ" is something a person can actually live out. Invite a few willing students to share, and model the kind of honesty you are asking for.

Close with hope. The portrait of Saul is sobering, but it is the first chapter of a story about grace. The same Lord who would soon meet Saul on the road meets us in our pride and self-trust and offers to do the same transforming work. Send them home not crushed by the warning but drawn toward the Savior who turns persecutors into preachers.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest self-examination as the beginning of transformation
- Naming a specific area of pride, zeal, or misplaced trust to surrender
- Grace as the hope that holds the lesson's warning together
- Spiritual formation as ongoing surrender to the lordship of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Which thread of Saul's story hit closest to home for you, and why?
- What is one specific, livable change you sense Christ asking of you?
- How does knowing where Saul ended up give you hope this week?