

ST. PAUL IS AN APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES

Biblical readings for the lesson: Isaiah 42:6/Mark 13:30/ 16:15/Matt 24: 14/28:19-20
Luke 4:24-27/ John 4/ John 10 / Acts 1:8/Acts 13:1-3, 46-47/ Acts 28:28/ Romans
10:12-14/ Gal 3:8, 28/ Eph 3:6

Who are the gentiles? The word **gentile** is an English translation of the Latin word *Gentilis* which is translated in English as "gentile." The term refers to a person who is not a Jew. From the Jewish perspective, Gentiles were often seen as pagans who did not know the true God. During Jesus' time, many Jews took such pride in their cultural and religious heritage that they considered Gentiles "unclean," calling them "dogs" and "the uncircumcision." However, a careful reading of the OT, Gospels and NT letters can enlighten us to know and appreciate the mind, heart and compassion of God treating them as His own and wanted to save them and give them share in his kingdom.

Gentiles in the OT: The writers displayed a passionate intolerance toward the gentiles because of their immorality, idolatry, polygamy and various other pagan practices. But God was never an enemy of the Gentiles (Canaanites, Amorites, Girgashites, Hittites, Hivites, Jebusites and Perizzites). He willed any gentile could join and become part of his chosen people if they rejected pagan worship and their associated false gods such as Baal or Asherah. God was very concerned with the souls of the pagan nations and He never intended to destroy them. He expressed and poured out His love for the Pagan nations just as He did for the nation of Israel. In ancient biblical times, the Israelites were strictly warned to keep separate from the Gentiles upon entering Canaan, but the Mosaic Law also provided protection for Gentiles who settled among the Jews. The Book of Leviticus thus commands:

"The stranger that dwells with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself" (Lev. 19:34).

"I will sow her for Myself in the land I will also have compassion on her who had not obtained compassion, And I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!' And they will say, 'You are my God!'" (Hosea 2:23).

And should I not be concerned over the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot know their right hand from their left, not to mention all the animals? (Jonah 4:11)

God did pity those who were not part of the nation of Israel which is exactly why He sent Jonah to help the pagan nation Assyria in human history. Jonah refused to go to Nineveh but God made him go against Jonah's will. God didn't play favorites. He

punished His own chosen people just like other pagans nations if they didn't obey Him.

Gentile Heroes in the OT: **Jethro**, the Midianite father of Moses; **Ruth**, a Moabite, daughter in law of Noemi in the book of Ruth, **Rahab**, the Canaanite prostitute who helped the spies in Jericho in the book of Joshua; **Jael**, the Kenite woman who killed Canaanite commander Sisera in the book of Judges; **Naaman**, a Syrian commander who washed in the Jordan River seven times to be cleansed per the instructions of the prophet Elisha; and **Obed-Edom**, the Gittite whose tent housed the Ark of the Covenant for three months in 2 Samuel 6. **The Queen of Sheba**, who was amazed by King Solomon in all his splendor.

Jesus and the Gentiles: In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus alluded to the common association of Gentiles with paganism: "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Matthew 5:47). In another place in the same sermon, Jesus noted, "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases like the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words" (Matthew 6:7). True, Jesus reflected an ordinary Jewish mindset when he was concentrating his mission to the chosen people who were the first recipients of the good news and in order to instill the sense of godliness in Jewish people, he made a comparison between Jews and Gentiles. Nevertheless, He never closed his door to the Gentiles because He knew that he came to offer salvation to all people, Jew and Gentile because the heavenly Father had already predicted in the prophecy of Isaiah about his worldwide messianic ministry, saying He "will bring forth justice to the Gentiles" and would be "a light to the Gentiles" (Isaiah 42:1, 6).

Did Jesus come only for the Jews and not the Gentiles? No. Jesus is the Messiah that the Jews had been anticipating for centuries. Luke 3:15 reads "Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah". As such, He was born into a Jewish family and was reared according to Jewish law in a Jewish town. He selected Jewish disciples, spoke in Jewish synagogues and the Jewish temple and traveled mostly in Jewish areas. His mission, in fulfillment of the Jewish prophets, was to the Jewish people first. However, none of this means that Jesus' ministry was limited exclusively to the Jews.

Did Jesus minister to gentiles during His earthly ministry? He certainly did.

Jesus' Ministry Strategy: Jesus' first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth demonstrates that His life purpose extended far beyond the nation of Israel. He was not surprised that His own people did not receive His message. He said "There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow" (Luke 4:25-26). About this widow, we read in 1 Kings 17 where Elijah performed the remarkable miracle of replenishing the flour and oil and then later restored the widow's son to life. This widow was not Jewish, but a Gentile. Jesus did not stop with the example from the ministry of the Prophet Elijah. He gave another example of gentile mission. Naaman, the Syrian was not only a Gentile but a military leader-captain of the Syrian army (2 Kings 5:14). Naaman was stricken with leprosy, and although there were many lepers in Israel, "none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian" (Luke 4:27).

First Strategy to the Jews: Jesus did have a deep conviction of a special mission to the Jewish nation who were God's chosen people. Jesus' concern for Israel was shown in the instructions to the 12 disciples as He sent them out on their first preaching mission. *"Do not go in the way of the Gentiles,"* He said, *"and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"* (Matthew 10:5-6). His ministry was restricted primarily, but not exclusively to the Jews (Matthew 8:1-13). Luke's Gospel tells of a later preaching mission in which 70 others were sent out two by two (Luke 10:1). Just as the 12 apostles symbolically represent the 12 tribes of Israel, the 70 symbolize the Gentile nations.

Second Strategy to the Gentiles: In Matthew 15, Jesus was traveling through Tyre and Sidon, a Gentile region, and "a Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly'". This Gentile woman recognized Jesus as the Messiah by addressing Jesus, Son of David", but Jesus did not answer a word. As the woman kept up her appeals, He finally responded, but His words seemed to hold little hope: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel". However, the woman did not give up, and Jesus eventually granted her request, based on her "great faith". The fact that Jesus helped the Canaanite woman, even though His mission was to the Jews, is a significant detail in the Gospel narrative. Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus gave other indications that His power and compassion reached to all people. He traveled through the Gentile region of the Gerasenes (Mark 5:1). He ministered in a Samaritan city (John 4). He healed lepers among the Samaritans (a mixed race, half-Jews). After curing the ten lepers (Luke 17:27-29), He made an insightful remark about the Samaritan who came to thank him by falling at his feet, "Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine? Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?" Then he said to him, Stand up and go; your faith has saved you."

After healing the Roman centurion's servant, He said to the Jewish crowd which was following Him: *"Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith"* (Matthew 8:10,). He did not stop there but continued with this solemn prediction: *"I tell you, many such foreigners shall come from the east and the west to join Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven"*. The events of Jesus' last week in Jerusalem bear eloquent testimony to the fact that He moved resolutely toward the cross. He entered the city on a donkey, in order to fulfill the prophet Zechariah's prediction from the Old Testament of a king who would speak peace to the nations and whose dominion would be from sea to sea (Zechariah 9:9-10). He went to the temple and found greedy religious businessmen taking advantage of those that had come to worship. So he cleansed this corruption from the *court of the Gentiles* declaring sternly, *"My house shall be called a house of prayer for 'all' the nations"* (Mark 11:17). Standing in the temple, He denounced the chief priests and Pharisees, the official leaders of the Jewish nation, for having failed to be good stewards of the truths of the kingdom which had been entrusted to the chosen people and solemnly declared, *"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits"* (Matthew 21:43).

Gentiles Mission in the NT: In the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we see the gospel reaching the gentiles who accepted Jesus as their Messiah. The early Christian church

was growing because of the gentiles who added in number of the believers. But the mindset and response of the apostles was a bit mixed one initially towards the gentiles who entered into Christian communities. We find both acceptance and resistance and they even convoked a council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) to discuss this issue of accepting the gentiles who joined the covenantal people (Jewish Christians). This theme is one of the major themes in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. Some prominent Gentiles in the NT are Luke, Cornelius, Titus and Philemon.

How is St. Paul an apostle to the Gentiles? St. Paul's letters outline his missionary journeys, exhort and admonish the various Christian congregations, discuss ethics and doctrinal matters. In the midst of all this, we get a revelation of St. Paul himself and his inner character in the book of the Acts of the Apostles and his letters. Of all the founders of the Church, Paul was perhaps the most brilliant and many-sided, the broadest in outlook and therefore the best endowed to carry Christianity to alien lands and peoples. Although St. Paul was not one of the Twelve, none of the twelve could match his contributions. He was the Apostle of the Gentiles, par excellence, and his missionary journeys brought the Gospel to Asia Minor and Greece, where he founded and directed many churches. At Antioch in Pisidia Paul delivered a memorable discourse to the Jews, concluding with these words (Acts 13: 46-47): *"It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first, but since you reject it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we now turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord commanded us, I have set you for a light to the Gentiles, to be a means of salvation to the very ends of the earth."*

Why is St. Paul called an Apostle to the Gentiles? Paul calls himself "the apostle to the Gentiles" in Romans 11:13. It's not as though Paul never preached to the Jews—on the contrary, his custom was to preach first in the synagogue when entering a new city (Acts 17:2). In fact he first visited the synagogues during his missionary journeys. He felt obligated to first preach to the Jews, and only thereafter would he make an effort with the Gentiles. For example, he first visited the synagogues in Damascus, Syria (Acts 9:20), Salamis, Cyprus (13:5), Pisidian Antioch (13:14) and Iconium (14:1) in Asia Minor, Thessalonica (17:1), Berea (17:10), Athens (17:17), and Corinth (18:8) in Greece, and then to Ephesus in Asia Minor (18:19). Only after continued rejection by the Jews (Acts 13:46, 18:6, 28:24) did he turn to the Gentiles. It is not as though the other apostles never preached to Gentiles (Acts 10). But in a real sense, Paul's ministry among the Gentiles was unique. Paul's mission was to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles: "He chose me to be a servant of Christ Jesus for the Gentiles and to do the work of a priest in the service of his good news. God did this so that the Holy Spirit could make the Gentiles into a holy offering, pleasing to him" (Romans 15:16).

Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles by God's choice. The Lord Jesus declared that He had a specific mission for Paul: *"This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel"* (Acts 9:15). Paul had been set apart from birth and called by God's grace so that he might "preach [Christ] among the Gentiles" (Gal 1:15-16).

Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles because the bulk of his ministry was spent in pagan lands planting churches among the Gentiles. Paul was the first to preach the gospel on European soil. His three missionary journeys took him far from Jewish lands

to Gentile areas where Diana, Zeus, and Apollo were worshiped, to Cyprus, to Athens, to Malta, and eventually to Rome. He desired to preach in Spain as well (Rom 15:24), but it's unsure if he ever made it that far.

Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles because he was under obligation to serve in Gentile lands. Paul's testimony was that "this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ" (Eph 3:8). Peter preached (mainly) to the Jews, and Paul was commissioned to preach (mainly) to the Gentiles: "God had given me the responsibility of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as he had given Peter the responsibility of preaching to the Jews" (Gal 2:7).

Paul was well-qualified to be the apostle to the Gentiles. He was well-educated, being thoroughly trained in the Mosaic Law under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) and having received a classical Roman education in Tarsus. He had the ability to argue his point from Jewish Law (Gal 4:21–31) and to illustrate it from Greek literature (Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12; 1 Cor 15:33). He held the privileges of Roman citizenship, which opened doors of opportunity throughout the Roman world (Acts 22:3, 25–29; 28:30). The Lord specifically chose Paul to be the apostle to the Gentiles to show that salvation is offered to all people. Eph 3:6 "*that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel*" speaks of how Christ brings together both Gentile and Jew: "And this is God's plan: Both Gentiles and Jews who believe the Good News share equally in the riches inherited by God's children. Both are part of the same body, and both enjoy the promise of blessings because they belong to Christ Jesus".

The Letter to the Galatians is an important historical record of early Christianity, in particular for the movements of Paul in the years following his conversion in Damascus. Paul expressed interest in his relationship with the Apostle Peter, for after Damascus he then went to Jerusalem and remained with Peter for fifteen days (Galatians 1:18). It was eventually decided that Paul and Barnabas would serve as Apostles to the Gentiles, and that Peter would guide the Jewish population (2:8-9). St. Peter served as the first Bishop of Syria before he attended the large Jewish population of Rome. Paul appears to support this in his Letter to the Romans 15:20 when he remarks: "*Thus I aspire to proclaim the Gospel not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on another man's foundation.*" However, Paul ultimately ended up in Rome in chains and proclaimed the Gospel for two years (Acts 28:30).

The direct and confrontational personality of Paul clearly comes out in Galatians, especially in Chapter 2, when he confronts Peter in Antioch over the "Judaizers". There was a significant group known as the Judaizers in early Christianity, especially among Jewish Christians, who felt that Christian converts had to observe the Jewish Law as well as follow the teachings of Christ, and this applied even to Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas raised this issue at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) and had clearly won the day with the argument that Christianity stood on its own and Christians did not need to observe the customs of the Jewish law, such as circumcision and other Mosaic rituals. They were supported by Peter, the leader of the Apostles, with four qualifications added by James, the Bishop of Jerusalem: to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and unlawful marriage.

With Paul, God began to carry out His original intention for peoples to know Him, His truth and His laws and ultimately to experience God's peace and prosperity. God specifically chose Paul to begin the work of making all people into spiritual Israelites (Romans 2:28-29; Galatians 6:15-16). God drafted His great plan for the gentiles and sent Paul, a converted Jew, skilled in the ways of God, grown up in the understanding of the gentiles' culture as well. God used Paul as an instrument to open doors to gentiles in a much broader way. As a result, all peoples have the opportunity and privilege to become spiritual Israelites. God used Paul, although Paul acknowledged the credit goes to God.

Paul's words to Timothy remain a great source of encouragement for Christians of all ages: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

When we read Paul's letters in the Bible and the account of his ministry in Acts, we concur with what he said about himself "becoming all things to all". We should keep in mind why God chose and used Paul. It was because He knew Paul was capable of remaining a faithful servant to the end: "*For this man is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites*" (Acts 9:15).

The spirit of God moved St. Paul tremendously out of Asia Minor to new ground, new boundaries for a much greater harvest. Churches were founded in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth. Paul was determined to follow the leadings of the Holy Spirit. He was convinced that it was possible to "live by the Spirit," and his life now stands as an example for all of us. From the time of his conversion, Paul kept the faith, often in the face of intimidating odds. He was beaten, jailed, maligned and plotted against but he never lost his courage or turned away from his calling. He brought the gospel to Jews and Gentiles. He established an extensive network of brothers and sisters, trained them, formed them into leaders and showed them how to grow in holiness and as a church family. His writings continue to help believers learn how to find Jesus and to give him glory and honor.

What is the mind of the church now regarding her evangelizing ministry to the people of other faiths in line with St. Paul's mission to the gentiles? Jesus fulfills the prophecies of Isaiah concerning his mission to the Gentiles (Isaiah 56 and 60) Isaiah clearly proclaims the radical message that God's blessings are for all people even foreigners and eunuchs who were often excluded from worship and not even considered citizens in Israel. Whatever our race, social position, work or financial situation, God's blessings are as much for us as for everyone else. We should not exclude anyone in any way.

Ad Gentes – "To the Nations" is the decree issued by the Second Vatican Council that deals with the missionary activity of the Church. Ad Gentes affirms the work of missionary activity within the larger context of the Church's mission of evangelization to all people, even those who are already Christians. The Church is charged with "preaching the gospel and implanting the church among people who do not yet believe in Christ" (AG 6). God has sent the Church, "the universal sacrament of salvation," to

the nations to preach the gospel to all. This responsibility falls on the whole people of God. Missionary activity is a need of our time. While there are people who hear a special call to serve as missionaries for the spread of the faith, yet the responsibility lies on every baptized christian. There are still souls who do not know Christ. We are called to spread the knowledge of the love and the good news that Jesus is the unique savior.

Nostra Aetate (1965): This is the shortest second Vatican council document on church's relationship with non christian religions. It affirms that "all men form but one community". **Firstly** the council then makes the point that the Church has a high regard for anything which may "reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men." Yet the Church remains duty-bound to "proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life." As God has reconciled all things to himself in Christ, it is only in Him that "men find the fullness of their religious life."

Secondly the Council states the Church's high regard for Muslims, because they worship "God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth" and they strive to do His will. Muslims also have some recognition of Jesus and Blessed Mother. Therefore, the Fathers ask all to forget past quarrels and to make a sincere effort at mutual understanding: "For the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values."

Thirdly the Council acknowledges the special ties which link "the people of the New Covenant to the stock of Abraham" and so explores briefly the relationship of the Church to Judaism. The Church understands that "the beginning of her faith and election is to be found in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets". She (Church) realizes that she received the revelation of the Old testament through the Jews and that the "she draws nourishment from that good olive tree onto which the wild olive branches of the Gentiles have been grafted" (Rom. 11:17-24), because Christ has reconciled Jews and Gentiles through His cross.

The church recognizes with St. Paul that the "Jews remain very dear to God" and that God "does not take back the gifts He bestowed or the choice he made." Therefore, "the Church awaits the day, known to God alone, when all peoples will call on God with one voice." Therefore "the Council wishes to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation". In particular the Fathers note that "neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during the passion." Thus the Church opposes every form of persecution, and deploras all anti-Semitism. To the contrary, "it is the duty of the Church to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's universal love and the source of all grace." Therefore, the Church reproves any discrimination against people or any harassment of them on the basis of their race, color, condition in life or religion. Accordingly, following the footsteps of the holy apostles Peter and Paul, the sacred Council earnestly begs the Christian faithful to "conduct themselves well among the Gentiles" (1 Pet 2:12) and if possible to be at peace with all men (Rom 12:18) and in that way to be true sons of the Father who is in heaven.

Saints Peter and Paul, the pillars of the church: St. Peter was a fisherman, born with no formal education. St. Paul was not a fisherman. He was a man of education and status, who was quite possibly being groomed for an authoritative office or distinguished

profession. He was a Roman citizen, well versed in law and philosophy. He spoke at least three languages (Greek, Hebrew and Latin) and was actively involved in political affairs in Jerusalem at the time of his conversion. Both of these men were the movers and shakers of the Apostolic Age. One was regional and the other was thoroughly international. One lived his early life in poverty while the other was born to privilege. God evidently needed both of these men to establish Christianity in the ancient world. St. Peter's story affirms the Biblical principle: *Exaltavit humiles*. God delights in exalting the humble and frustrating the wisdom of the wise. In the story of salvation, we see the exaltation of the humble: a slave's son (Moses) is taken from a river and raised into a great prophet. Shepherd boy (David) was chosen to slay giants, and a baby in a manger to become the King of Kings.

In the Gospels, St. Peter comes across as an earnest and good-natured simpleton, overflowing with zeal and sometimes ignorance and that is why Jesus constantly chided him after he misunderstands an instruction. He tends to need literal explanations for metaphors or parables. He failed the critical test by denying Our Lord and running away. Even after seeing the Risen Christ in the flesh, he still did not seem to understand the role that he was meant to play. Instead of making plans for the growth of Church, he returned to his fishing nets, where Christ sought him out yet again to ask him to "feed my sheep." Only after the Holy Spirit descended upon him on the feast of Pentecost, He changed dramatically. He took on a new aura of authority. He started breaking out of prisons, with angels as his assistants. People lined up on the streets hoping that his shadow will pass over them. He truly became a spiritual superhero and spiritual leader of the Christians.

Uniqueness of St. Paul's apostleship: St. Paul's story is very different. Unlike the other apostles, he did not react with joy the first time he heard the Good News. Rather, his first impulse was to persecute the Church. A dramatic reprimand was needed to set him on the right path. After his conversion, he became an invaluable asset to the young Church. No doubt it was by design that God placed his most scholarly apostle under the authority of St. Peter. His letters are more than just scholarly works; they reflect divine inspiration as well as personal brilliance. God chose this well-educated and scholarly man to *write* some of the Bible's most important theological masterpieces, a roadmap for the church to follow. His familiarity with ancient philosophy and Jewish law is evident in his compositions. His political and social knowledge are also highly relevant to his ministry. He knows how to exploit his Roman citizenship to win a larger platform, thus extending the reach of the Good News. The Apostles preached the Gospel all across the ancient world, but St. Paul was the mind of Christ, taking his gospel message to Rome and from Rome to every nook and corner as Rome was the center of Christianity. His skills, love, sacrifice and commitments for Christ and his mystical body are extraordinary. God used his diverse gifts for his church. The message that Jesus is the savior of all became a reality in the writings and preachings and mission of St. Paul. It is necessary for us to fulfill the Church's evangelical mission to all. Each of us has received valuable gifts. It's up to us to offer those gifts back to God in service like the greatest apostle St. Paul, the great apostle of the gentiles.