

*Christ Jesus Saved the Foremost of Sinners: 1 Timothy 1:12-17*  
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We come this morning to a wonderful and profound and also very concise statement of the Gospel in Paul's first letter to Timothy. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 1:15, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost." What a glorious statement that is, as Paul expresses it with such heart-felt recognition of his own sinfulness and his deep hope in Christ's saving work. I pray for my own heart, and for each of you, that the glory of this statement will capture us and astound us afresh this morning. There's always the danger that this most exciting and wonderful news will become dull and routine to us. And I know that I don't have the power to awaken Gospel-affections in my own heart, much less to do that for any of you. And therefore we need to ask our sovereign Lord to send His Holy Spirit to work among us and give us a fresh amazement of the fact that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

In this first chapter of Paul's letter to Timothy, he is instructing Timothy concerning the matter of false teachers. These verses that we'll be studying this morning are still in the context of confronting false teachers. But Paul does digress a little bit in these verses in order to offer himself as an example of the radical changes brought about by the true gospel. Remember that false teaching produces very bad fruit, but the truth of the Gospel produces good fruit. As Paul wrote in verse 5, "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." Only when God changes our hearts will true love issue forth. And then at the end of verse 11, as Paul wraps up his comments on the lawful use of the law, he says it is "in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted." And from there he launches into thanksgiving and praise for what God has done in his life, which is a riveting illustration of the power of the Gospel. In this way Paul digresses into his personal testimony which serves the purpose of confronting false teaching, because it is a real life example of how the truth changes hearts. And what a dramatic example his life is, because he now loves what he once hated.

Let's look at this passage from the standpoint of Paul's life, first considering Paul's former life, and then God's saving action, and finally the response of thanksgiving and praise. Notice that this paragraph begins with thanksgiving: verse 12, "I thank him who has given me strength." And it ends with a doxology: verse

17, “To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.” And in between this thanksgiving and praise is the testimony of a man who was radically changed by the grace and mercy of Christ Jesus.

### **Paul’s Former Life**

Paul describes his former life in very shocking terms. He doesn’t try to minimize the evil he was involved in. He recognizes the weight of his sin, and he wants to present that accurately so that the Gospel can shine forth. So with great transparency he states the truth of the matter in verse 13: “formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.” These are the adjectives that describe who Paul was before God’s grace invaded his life. He is now a different man, but this is who he was.

First, he was a blasphemer. He was fiercely opposed to Jesus Christ and all who believed in Jesus Christ. He even says he tried to get believers to blaspheme (Acts 26:11). His life mission was to slander and revile the name of Jesus Christ. He was also a persecutor, which was the action produced by his blasphemous attitude. He wanted to squelch this new movement of Jesus followers, and so he relentlessly persecuted them. And he did so violently, which the last word refers to. He was an insolent opponent, meaning he totally disregarded the rights of anyone else, and instead, full of hubris and anger in his heart, he violently sought to destroy the church.

At the end of Acts 7, following the stoning of Stephen, it says, “And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.” Then in Acts 8:1-3 we read, “And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.” Another insight into Paul’s former life comes from his own words as he spoke before Agrippa in Acts 26. “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities” (Acts 26:9-11). This guy was serious about persecuting the church. It wasn’t just something he spoke out against a time or two. He was passionately and relentlessly committed to stamping this out, and he was willing to

use whatever means available to do so. He was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent opponent.

He also describes himself in verse 13 as one who had acted ignorantly in unbelief. After summarizing the wretchedness of his former life, he writes, “But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.” Now, we have to be careful here. Paul is not condoning his sin in any way by saying that he committed these sins ignorantly in unbelief. He is making the point that he wasn’t aware that he was opposing God in these ways. He actually thought he was serving God by persecuting the church. He thought the followers of the Way were the ones who were opposing God. In this way Paul’s zeal for God prompted him to persecute the church (Acts 22:3-4), but his zeal was without knowledge. It may be that in this statement Paul is contrasting himself with the false teachers who are opposing the truth with eyes wide open. They have been taught the truth and profess to know the truth of the Gospel, and yet they are leading people astray by teaching different doctrine and devoting themselves to myths and genealogies and wandering away into vain discussion. But still, Paul is culpable for his sin. He’s not in exactly the same position as the false teachers, but he is still guilty for the heinous sins which he committed, even though they were committed in ignorance and unbelief. The amazing thing is that the Lord had mercy on him.

Matthew Henry has written, “Frequently those who are designed for great and eminent services are left to themselves before their conversion, to fall into great wickedness, that the mercy of God may be the more glorified in their remission, and the grace of God in their regeneration” (*Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1 Timothy 1:12-17). That is certainly the case in the life of Paul. He had formerly been a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent of the church. He acted ignorantly in unbelief. God left him to himself before his conversion. God allowed Saul of Tarsus to fall into great wickedness. And the purpose, as we’re going to see in a moment, is that God’s grace would be glorified in Paul’s conversion and subsequent ministry.

As a point of application we should each think about how we would describe our own lives before God saved us. Each of our stories will be different, of course. Some may point to very blatant outward sins. Others, by God’s grace, were saved at a young age and were spared from walking very far down that awful road that leads to destruction. But whatever your background, whatever your story, we should all consider who we were apart from Christ and the person we would be today apart from Christ. If God left us to ourselves and allowed us to pursue the sinful desires that once pervaded our lives—desires that we still battle against today, but apart from God’s we would not battle against

(instead we would run headlong into all kinds of wickedness). Apart from God's grace, what would my life be like? This is a wonderful question to contemplate because it will deepen our appreciation for the Gospel. If we're going to exhibit the thankfulness of verse 12 and if we're going to erupt in praise like Paul does in verse 17, then we must first have a very real sense of what God has saved us from.

Thomas Goodwin, a Puritan preacher, wrote this to his son: "When I was threatening to become cold in my ministry, and when I felt Sabbath morning coming and my heart not filled with amazement at the grace of God, or when I was making ready to dispense the Lord's Supper, do you know what I used to do? I used to take a turn up and down among the sins of my past life, and I always came down again with a broken and a contrite heart, ready to preach, as it was preached in the beginning, the forgiveness of sins," (quoted in William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 46-47).

Let us do the same. As we listen to the preaching of God's Word, as we partake of the Lord's Supper, as we minister to one another in our small groups, as we witness to others, let's continually be reminded of the sins in which we once walked, so that we can continually be reminded of God's grace in forgiving those sins. C. J. Mahaney is a contemporary preacher whom I respect greatly, and in his book *The Cross-Centered Life* he reflects on his sinful lifestyle before God saved him. He writes, "Before God saved me in 1972, I, too, was a blasphemer. I lived for myself and my own pleasure. I lived in rebellion against God and mocked those who followed Him. I spent my high school and college years deeply immersed in the local drug culture. . . . Often my eyes fill with tears at the memories of my foolishness and sin. And in the same instant, my heart will be filled with an unspeakable, holy joy. I am no longer the same! By the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross, I've been forgiven of the countless sins I've committed" (pg. 12-13).

This is the beauty of the Gospel and the beauty of this passage. The story doesn't end with the description of what Paul used to be, or what C. J. Mahaney used to be, or what you or I used to be. The story moves on to God's saving action to change us into something new.

### **God's Saving Action**

In stark contrast to Paul's sinfulness stands the mercy of Christ Jesus our Lord. Two times in this passage Paul refers to this mercy, and in each case it is in contrast to his sin. In verse 13, after the statement that he was formerly a blasphemer, persecutor and insolent opponent, he says, "But I received mercy . . ." It's a

passive verb—I was shown mercy. It’s what we would call a divine passive. It was the Lord who took the initiative in bestowing mercy upon this wretched sinner. Paul was merely the recipient of this divine mercy. In verse 16 he says the same thing. After the mention of his sinfulness in verse 15, that he is the foremost of sinners, he then says in verse 16, “But I received mercy . . .” Also, in between those two statements, Paul writes in verse 14 that “the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” In contrast to the unbelief and hatred of his former life, God’s grace has now changed him into a man who is full of faith and love. Thus we see the power of the Lord’s mercy and grace in Paul’s life.

This brings us to the heart of this passage, which is the well-known statement in verse 15. This is the first of five *trustworthy sayings* which are found in the pastoral epistles. Two more of these are in 1 Timothy (3:1; 4:9), which we’ll come to as we continue through this letter (also 2 Timothy 2:11; Titus 3:8). This first *trustworthy statement* or *faithful saying* is a succinct, but profound, summary of the Gospel. “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” First we observe that this is a trustworthy statement. This is not like the speculation of the false teachers. Nor is it like the theories and beliefs of false religions or the empty spirituality that is so prevalent in our culture. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is trustworthy. It is true. And therefore it is deserving of full acceptance. The Gospel is worthy of our full acceptance. We need not doubt it. In fact, we *must* not doubt it. Because of our sin we can so easily become distracted or skeptical. Doubts can creep into our minds and hearts. But that doesn’t change the trustworthiness of the Gospel.

The statement of the Gospel in this verse is that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Several things are implicit in this short phrase. First, Christ Jesus came into the world, which reminds us that before He came into the world He was with the Father, and has existed forever and ever as the second Person of the Godhead. As Jesus says in John 16:28, “I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.” Second, we see the wonder of Christ’s incarnation, that He became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). Paul writes in that beautiful passage in Philippians 2 that Christ Jesus, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8). And that is the third observation from 1 Timothy 1:15, that

Christ Jesus came *to save sinners*, which He did by dying on a cross. Christ Jesus came into this world, taking on our nature, and He went to the cross to pay the penalty for our sin. As the perfect, sinless, holy and pure Son of God, He took our sins upon Himself so that we can receive mercy and grace. He was counted as a blasphemer and a persecutor and an insolent opponent so that men and women like Paul and like you and me can be forgiven.

Those who are forgiven are those who, by God's grace, come to the point of repentance and faith. Repenting and turning away from sin, and turning to Jesus Christ in faith and hope. And an essential part of this is the realization that *I am a sinner*. That's the bad news that has to be understood before the Good News will make any sense. This is what Paul acknowledges at the end of verse 15. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, *of whom I am the foremost*." Some might think that this is a false humility on Paul's part, but I think God had done such a work in Paul's heart that as he looked back on his former life and contemplated the immense mercy of God, he truly considered himself the foremost of sinners. He couldn't fathom anyone else being more opposed to God than he had been. And though he knows that he is now forgiven of those sins, he remains humbled by the wickedness of his former manner of life. He writes in 1 Corinthians 15:9-10, "For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain" (see also Ephesians 3:8).

Like Paul, we need to have an appropriate view of our own sin, and an appropriate view of God's mercy and grace. We have all sinned greatly, and we each continue to sin on a daily basis. And it's so important that we never minimize our sins or ignore them or think that we're not as bad as the next guy. We need to pray that God will reveal our sins to us. So often we are blinded to our sins, because we don't want to see it or deal with it. But the more we see of our sin, the more we can rejoice in the Gospel. Remember what Jesus said of the sinful woman who anointed his feet. He said, "Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47). How much do you love your Savior? Do you love Him only a little, or do you love Him much? The difference will have a lot to do with how well we understand our own sin, because the more we see of our sin the more we'll see of God's mercy and grace.

God's saving action in Paul's life is seen also in the fact that he was called to be an apostle. This is the other half of what makes Paul's story so amazing. Formerly his life was characterized by violent persecution of the church, and then after

his transformation he became a great apostle and leader of the church. In verse 12 Paul thanks the Lord “because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service.” It might sound odd to hear Paul say that the Lord judged him faithful, after hearing how perverse his life had been. But there’s a phrase in 1 Corinthians 7:25 that sheds light on this. There Paul says, “I give my judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy.” So it’s not as though Paul views himself as being trustworthy in a way that caught God’s attention. Rather, he recognizes that he is trustworthy only because of the Lord’s mercy, and therefore his trustworthiness is not the ground of his calling as an apostle, but the result of his calling. The Lord judged him faithful, appointing Paul to His service.

The amazing story is found in Acts 9, which begins with Saul breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, but on his way to Damascus “suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’” After that he was without sight for three days, but then God spoke to Ananias in a vision and told him that Saul “is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.” Of course, Ananias could hardly believe it. He knew about this guy Saul, and all the horrible things he was doing to the saints. But he went, and Saul’s sight was restored and he was baptized. And the man who had just days earlier been trying to imprison the believers, was now proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” Can you imagine what this would have been like for Ananias and the others who witnessed this first-hand? Many might have wondered at first if it was some kind of trick. But as Saul began to preach, and as he began to be persecuted for his preaching (now he was on the receiving end), it became clear that something radical had happened in his heart.

We might ask ourselves why God chose to do things this way. First of all, why would God allow someone like Saul of Tarsus to wreak havoc among the early church? And why would God then convert Saul of Tarsus and call him to be an apostle? We know that God does everything for a reason, and the ultimate purpose of everything He does is to display the glory and beauty of His own nature. And in 1 Timothy 1:16 Paul explains this purpose. “But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.” You see, all of this happened so that Jesus Christ might display his

perfect patience. Paul's story is a story of the Lord's mercy and grace. It is a story that highlights the abundant patience of Jesus Christ, to withhold the judgment that Saul deserved and then to forgive him and change him and call him to serve.

In this way Paul's conversion and calling demonstrate Jesus Christ's perfect patience, and it does so as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. In other words, Paul's story is meant to be an encouragement to you and me and others who will believe. If God saved Paul, a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent, and called him to be an apostle, then there is hope for you and me, too. No matter what you've done, no matter how far your sinful passions have taken you, there's hope because Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—even the foremost of sinners, even wretched sinners like us. Be encouraged by Paul's testimony. Let it fill you with hope, that wherever you've been, and wherever you are right now, God can radically change your life and use you in mighty ways in His service.

### **Thanksgiving and Praise**

Thanksgiving and praise serve as bookends to this section, and I think we see the emotion and excitement of the apostle coming through in the flow of these verses. At the end of verse 11 he mentioned the fact that he had been entrusted with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God, and the mention of that prompted him to give thanks for this great privilege that he had been called to and had been given strength for. Then as he writes about the great transformation God had brought about in his life, it leads finally to a crescendo of praise in verse 17. He is overflowing with awe and delight in what God has done, that he can't help but break forth in a doxology. To the King of ages—He is the Sovereign ruler, and will be forever and ever. He is immortal—He will never die and His power will never diminish, unlike idols that crumble and fall. He is invisible—also unlike idols, God is Spirit and His glory is beyond what we can take in with these mortal eyes. He is the only God. He is without rival or equal. He is God, and God alone. And therefore He is worthy of all honor and glory forever and ever. This is the spontaneous exultation and praise that erupts from a heart captivated by the Gospel. This is the thanksgiving and worship that is produced from a life transformed by grace.

I close with the words of John Newton, whose testimony resembles Paul's in certain respects. Newton had lived a wicked life before God saved him. He had been a slave trader and lived the life of recklessness that went along with it. But God graciously and miraculously saved him and called him to be a preacher. He is best known for writing the hymn, "Amazing Grace," in which he says, "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch

like me! I once was lost but now am found; was blind, but now I see.” Newton wanted to be constantly reminded of the sinful life from which God had saved him, so he wrote out Deuteronomy 15:15 and put it over the mantle in his study where he would always see it: “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you.” Finally, Newton’s epitaph, which he wrote himself, is a beautiful summary of a life changed by God’s amazing grace. “John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy” (see John Piper’s biographical talk on Newton, [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org)).