

"The Glory of God's Grace" - 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Do you ever find it hard to believe that you can believe? I do! I know from scripture that I was dead in my trespasses and sins. I know that I couldn't even see the kingdom of God before the Holy Spirit kicked me to spiritual life. I know I'm a sinner. Because I am a sinner, I sin. I know I'm an idolater, because I have the tendency to value created things more than I value God. I know I have this innate desire to run my own life and to run from God's perfect will. I am a rebel, guilty of cosmic treason.

I have done absolutely nothing to deserve salvation. Yet, God chose me in Jesus before the foundation of the universe! (Ephesians 1:4) How do I know that God chose me? Because I can believe. I believe that while I was still a sinner, Christ died for me! (Romans 5:8) And I know I wouldn't be able to believe if I had not been given the gift of faith.

If you can believe in the finished work of Jesus Christ, you too have been given the precious gift of faith. Your faith is a gift of God's amazing grace.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

I know I'm not the only one who finds it hard to believe I can believe. In fact, I'm actually in pretty good company. The Apostle Paul found it hard to believe too. And he absolutely revels in the grace that was poured out on him by Almighty God. We all should make it a point to thank our God for the faith to believe. We too should revel in God's grace because it is a glorious grace, and by it, Jesus Christ is honored, exalted and glorified.

Let's go to our text now.

And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 1:12-17)

Just before this passage, Paul had been warning Timothy about false teachers. These false teachers were those who had ...

... strayed and had turned aside to idle talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm. (1 Timothy 1:6-7)

In this passage, Paul is contrasting his ministry with the counterfeit ministry of the false teachers. But the one thing we should notice is that Paul takes no credit for this at all.

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, (v. 12)

It was Jesus who counted Paul faithful, even before he was faithful. It was Jesus who put Paul into the ministry, even while he was trying to stamp out the Church.

Paul was an unlikely candidate for Apostleship and he readily admits it. He says right here: "I was a blasphemer. I was a persecutor. I was an insolent man." Now, if you had to choose your next pastor, would those be characteristics you would be looking for?

We first meet Paul in Acts, Chapter 7, back when he was known as Saul of Tarsus. He was an up-and-comer among the Jewish religious elite, trained at the feet of Gamaliel, young member of the council. Then Stephen became the first Christian martyr. Moved by the Holy Spirit, Stephen preached a powerful sermon. He was stoned to death for his trouble. As he was murdered, we read this:

... the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. (Acts 7:58)

Saul, who would later be known as Paul, was much more than just the coat-check guy. In that culture, having cloaks laid at your feet was a gesture of honor. Saul was in charge of that stoning. He was supervising the work.

In Chapter 8 of Acts, we read:

As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. (Acts 8:3)

This persecution that was led by Saul caused many of the Christians to flee Jerusalem and that's why Saul decided he should head to Damascus. He received authorization from the council and headed to Syria to locate and drag Christians back to Jerusalem for trial. Of course, on the road, he had a serious wake-up call.

Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4)

That voice belonged to Jesus Christ.

And so, Paul writes to Timothy:

although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. (1 Timothy 1:13)

You know, the good thing about ignorance is that it can be cured. Stupidity is actually pretty terminal.

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, But he who heeds counsel is wise. (Proverbs 12:15)

An ignorant person can be instructed and brought to an understanding of the truth. And that was Paul. When confronted with the truth of the risen Christ, Paul took the only logical path.

So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" (Acts 9:6)

I wonder if there is anyone here today who has not yet trusted Jesus Christ for salvation. You may not understand how desperate your situation is. You might be ignorant. Well, let me tell you, you are teetering on the edge of eternal hell fire! God is perfectly, awesomely holy. He cannot tolerate sin of any kind. And because of His perfect justice, every sin must be punished.

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23)

And

The wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23)

That is eternal death, a horrible situation in which you suffer the most excruciating agony separated from God and any sort of comfort. Forever!

You are a sinner and your sin must be punished. You can pay for your sin yourself, or, you can allow Jesus to pay for it instead. He's already done the work on the cross at Calvary. He took the hit for you. All He asks in return is that you just believe.

"This is the work of God," said Jesus, "that you believe in Him whom He sent." (John 6:29)

Please, accept the gift of salvation. Don't continue in your ignorance. Say, along with Paul, "Lord, what do you want me to do?"

Paul discovered something after his encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road.

And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 1:14)

That is an incredible thing. In Jesus, Paul found mercy, and he didn't receive the wrath he deserved. In Jesus, Paul found grace, which is receiving the exact opposite of what he deserved. In Jesus, he received faith so that he could be saved. And he experienced the love of God. You see,

God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

And because Paul experienced the love of God, he was transformed to the point where he could extend love to others. Instead of hating Christians, consenting to their deaths, and tossing them in prison, he experienced *koinonia* – the fellowship of Christ. He dedicated the rest of his life to bringing people to Christ, which is the ultimate act of love.

So, Paul makes a remarkable statement. It is the absolute focal point of all he communicates in our text this morning.

This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. (1 Timothy 1:15)

Paul considered himself to be the chief sinner of the human race, *prōtos* (πρῶτος) in the Greek. He is declaring himself to be the GOAT of sinners. The Greatest (sinner) Of All Time.

Wait a second. This is the great Apostle Paul. He was called by Jesus to be the Apostle to the Gentiles and he was completely faithful to that calling. He evangelized the Mediterranean Basin. He endured incredible hardship and persecution for the faith. He talks about it in 2 Corinthians:

From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—

besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:24-28)

Finally, he was beheaded for his testimony. Does this sound like the greatest sinner of all time to you? Well, that's what Paul thought of himself. And then he reveled in the glory of God's grace. Paul was so very thankful that he could believe. Paul knew that he could not merit salvation, never in a billion years. None of us can. We are saved by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. And we wouldn't have faith if it had not been graciously given to us by Almighty God

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,

In the original Greek, it is only 8 words but it encompasses the entire Gospel. Christ Jesus came into the world to save me. He chose to save me. I know I don't deserve it, but I'll take it and I will sing His praises because of it.

Can you say the same? I pray that you can.

So, I ask myself, "Why would Jesus do this for me?" I could say, so I wouldn't have to spend eternity in Hell. That is certainly a tremendous benefit and I am really, really grateful for it, but that isn't the reason. Or I could say it is so I could spend eternity with Jesus in the New Heaven and the New Earth. I'm looking forward to it. It's also a tremendous benefit, but that isn't the reason, either.

The reason Jesus saved me, the reason Jesus saves anyone is for His glory. Look closely at verse 16.

However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. (1 Timothy 1:16)

Because Paul considered himself the chief of sinners, he can serve as a most glorious demonstration of Christ's longsuffering. Paul is saying, in essence, "If Jesus can save me, He can save anyone!" And it is most certainly true. I've had the great privilege of seeing the most unlikely people come to faith. We see it in the Bible. Remember that demon possessed maniac on the East shore of the Sea of Galilee? Remember Matthew, the tax collector? Remember the Centurion at the foot of the cross? There are dozens of unlikely folks finding salvation in Christ.

But we see it in real life too. David West – who would have guessed? He's gone home to the Lord now, but if he were here, he would tell you that he had absolutely no use for Christ or Christians. But Jesus brought him to saving faith.

Ken Ainsworth – Really ... I was quite the unlikely candidate. And we see murderers, rapists, drug dealers ... there are millions of stories. If you think the grace of God is insufficient to save you, you don't know my Jesus! I don't care what you are guilty of, just lay your guilt down at the foot of the cross.

So, Paul's conversion and Paul's ministry reflect back on the saving grace of Jesus Christ and it brings glory to the Lord. When anyone comes to saving faith, may Jesus Christ be praised!

Your salvation shines a spotlight on the incredible grace of God and it is glorious! And by the way, if you are trusting Jesus for your salvation, don't you dare take credit for it. Give glory to Him, which is exactly why Paul, at this point, breaks into a doxology.

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 1:17)

And I too say, Amen!