

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Imagine that you are a banker and, in fact, an out of work banker looking for a job. And so you put out some feelers, network with some people and, in addition to all of that, you go and get a copy of the local newspaper and you start looking through the classified section. To your great delight, there in the first column is listed a job opening with a local bank, looking for a branch manager.

Well, as soon as you see the job title, you wonder if you're the kind of person they are looking for and, as you start reading down the page, you come across the strangest list of qualifications you have ever seen for a banking job. The advertisement reads:

The person applying for this position need not have any prior experience in banking, nor must he/she have any special training in banking. Indeed, no educational requirements are necessary whatsoever. A demonstrated track record of personal mis-management will be considered a plus, and persons with a history of unethical practices, bankruptcy, money laundering, and armed robbery will be given first consideration.

Imagine coming across a banking job description like that. A bank would be crazy to hire someone like *that*, with *that* sort of background and character to come and work as a branch manager. That would have to be the worst possible choice that one could make - to pick someone who was a former bank robber to come and be a bank manager. What kind of employer would do such a thing?

God would. God *did*.

That is exactly the sort of thing that God did when he took Paul, who was the most unlikely candidate one could imagine for Apostle, and yet set him apart as the one who would lead the Gospel charge into the gentile world. This morning we're going to be thinking a bit more about that whole event as we focus on Paul's letter to Timothy, Chapter 1, verses 12-17. Before we do that, let's pray together....

In the previous passage we saw how Paul addressed the false teachers' improper use of the law - employing it as a launching pad for pointless speculation, rather than using it to reveal sin and convince persons of their sinfulness and their need of the Gospel - the "glorious gospel" - as Paul describes it - the Gospel which has been entrusted to Paul.

And at this point in the letter it would seem that Paul *digresses*, at least momentarily, as he is once again caught up in wonder and amazement at God's undeserved goodness toward him. All of this talk about sin and about those who live contrary to the Gospel seems to have stirred up some bittersweet memories for Paul - as he recalls for us the moment when the realization of his *own* sin came crashing in upon

him and how, in the midst of all that, God's mercy was so freely poured out upon him.

And so, as we consider Paul's digression on the grace of God toward him, we will be considering three things: 1) God's grace toward Paul, in spite of who he was, 2) God's grace toward Paul *because* of who he was and 3) Paul's unwavering commitment to seeing that God alone was honored in and through his life.

The first thing to notice, then, is *God's grace toward Paul, in spite of who he was*. (Re-read vs 12-14). As was noted in the introduction, God's choosing Paul and setting him apart as the Apostle to the Gentiles seems, from a human standpoint, to have been a surprising choice, to say the least, and a terrible choice to say the worst.

Paul, you see, hasn't always been on the team. Paul didn't grow up as a Christian. Paul grew up as a Jew, in the strictest and most orthodox of Jewish traditions. In fact, in Philippians Paul describes himself as having been a Pharisee - someone who was completely devoted to practicing the Jewish religion. That was Paul's life before Christ.

And so, when Jesus came into the picture, and while he was going around doing all his miracles and causing such a stir in ancient Palestine, Paul would have been, at the same time, pursuing and practicing his Judaism in his own home town, far removed from the goings on in Jerusalem. And as news of this Jesus of Nazareth spread, perhaps Paul would have gotten wind of what was going on in Jerusalem and the surrounding cities and would not have like what he heard. After all, these followers of Christ were saying that the Messiah had come. They were worshiping this mere man, Jesus, as the Son of God. To Paul's orthodox Jewish ears, never having met the man Jesus, this would have sounded like sheer *blasphemy*.

And so Paul, after Jesus' has been crucified and resurrected and ascended to heaven - thinking he was doing God a great favor - devotes his life to going around and having Christians beaten, arrested and killed, doing anything he can to destroy this blasphemous religious sect. Listen to just a couple passages in Acts....

Acts 7:54-8:3 and Acts 9:1-2

This, ironically, is the person that God appoints as apostle to the Gentiles. Which, to use the opening illustration, is a lot like appointing a former bank robber to serve as a bank manager, or appointing Tom Daschle as head of the Republican National Convention, or George W Bush suddenly declaring that he has decided to join the Democratic Party. In human terms it would seem to be the height of irony to make Paul - a persecutor of Christians, a blasphemer against God, an accessory to murder - to make a man such as this an Apostle of the church. And yet that is precisely what God did. In spite of who he was, God showed great grace and mercy to Paul.

Now, on that note, there is something worth mentioning here and it has to do with

something Paul says in verse 13 which would be quite easy to mis-interpret. There Paul writes, "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy *because* I acted in ignorance and unbelief."

On the surface, you see, language like that *seems* to suggest that Paul received mercy from God *because he was "innocent"* - his actions didn't count against him because he was misinformed and so God would have been wrong to withhold mercy from him on account of those actions. In other words, one might read these words and see the *suggestion* that Paul somehow *deserved* the mercy he received from God.

But of course that couldn't possibly be what Paul is suggesting because it would contradict the entire TONE and THRUST of this letter, as well as the explicit teaching of Paul in other places - namely, that we are saved *purely* by the grace of God - i.e., the motivation for God's saving actions toward us are entirely *within Him* and he is not responding *in any way* to something that he sees in us.

So if Paul is not contradicting his own teaching in other places with these words, what IS he saying here? Well, in order to understand this, I think we need to take a step back from 1 Timothy to take in something from the wider context of the New Testament and turn to a passage in Mark's Gospel which records an incident which, surely, Paul would have been familiar with and which must have been on his mind as he penned these words. So, keep your finger here in 1 Timothy and turn with me to Mark 3:20-30.....

(Read Mark 3:20-30)

Now this incident, which is surely an echo of Numbers 15:22-31, is one which Paul would have known about and which must have been on his mind a great deal, given his former way of life. It may have been a question asked on different occasions by those that knew Paul before his conversion.

Indeed, it is very likely that some of Paul's opponents may have thrown this sort of thing in his face - a charge they may have used against him, hoping to unsettle him by such accusations and perhaps make him wonder if he was guilty of this terrible, eternal sin that Jesus talked about. However, when you look at the Mark passage in context, you see that this was not the case at all, for Paul.

In context, the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit - this eternal sin - was addressed to certain teachers of the law who - *and here's the crucial part* - had seen Jesus' power and working, had witnessed these clear evidences of his divinity and yet still denied that He was who He said He was. In fact, not only did they doubt his divinity, they went the opposite direction and said he was possessed by the Prince of Demons - Beelzebub. In summary, then, the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is simply the sin of blatant, high-handed, unbelief - in the face of clear evidence of to the contrary.

And so, when Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:13, "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in

ignorance and *unbelief* - when he says that he is saying that his blasphemy and attacks on God's people - bad though they were - did not fall into the category of this *extreme* kind of blasphemy described by Jesus.

In other words, he is not suggesting that he is innocent - he does admit to blasphemy and persecution and violence - but he is saying that he is innocent of this sort of *ultimate, eternal* kind of blasphemy. Unlike the Pharisees and teachers who had witnessed first hand the amazing ministry and works of Jesus, Paul did not have that sort of knowledge or experience of Jesus. He had reports and stories but that was it.

And then, on the way to creating more havoc and violence for Christians, *he met Jesus*. He finally DID experience the power and person of Jesus Christ. And he was never the same. Had he continued on in his rejection of Jesus, even after his Damascus road experience, then he would have been in the same position as the religious leaders described in Mark 3. But he didn't. Mark 3, verse 28 and 29 indicate that there IS a kind of blasphemy that is forgiveable, and there is a kind that is not. Paul is saying that his blasphemy was like that described in Mark 3:28 and not like that described in Mark 3:29.

The second thing I want you to notice here is not only God's grace toward Paul, in spite of who he was, but also notice God's grace toward Paul *because of who he was*. (Read again verses 15-16)....

With a statement that was probably part of an early creed of the church, Paul deftly summarizes the mission and ministry of Christ - "he came into the world to save sinners" - and then he adds - "of whom I am the worst". Paul willingly and easily includes himself in the category of sinner. He doesn't see this fact as something which is only true of his PAST. He sees it as an on-going reality in which he finds himself as a Christian.

However, while Paul does at other times and in other places talk in anguish with regard to the on-going battle with sin, he acknowledges HERE that he can also see beyond that reality to an even greater one. He can see that despite his personal struggle there are greater purposes - even divine purposes - associated with it. Namely, that the greatness of Paul's sin only served to highlight how great was God's grace to him.

I can remember when I was younger going on numerous camping trips with the Boy Scouts. Whenever we would go, one of my favorite things was to simply sleep outside under the stars and just stare at them for hours until I fell asleep. And one thing I noticed in all of that star-gazing was that whenever we were far away from the city, in a place that was quite remote, the stars would seem *especially* bright. And the reason the light seemed so much brighter out in the country was because *the black was so much darker*. There was no light from the city to compete with the stars. The sky was jet black

and against that very dark backdrop the light of the stars seemed especially brilliant.

I think that's part of what Paul means when he says in verse 16, "But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life." Paul's life - as the worst of sinners - was like a dark backdrop against which the beauty of God's grace only showed more brilliantly. And that extreme contrast - Paul says - served as an example for others who might believe. People could look at Paul's life and see his great sin and see God's great grace and be encouraged to believe that God really can and does forgive sin - even great sin.

And what an encouragement that was and still is today. I mean, I don't know about you, but I see Paul describing himself as "the worst of sinners" and I say to myself, "Well, the only reason Paul said that was because he didn't know about me. Paul wouldn't say that if he knew what sorts of things I've been up to". Perhaps some of you feel the same way. But you see this is precisely why Paul's words here are so important. Paul's example is so extreme that it can be a great comfort to people who feel that they have screwed up so badly that even God could not forgive them. It can be a great comfort to people who feel that they have tested God's patience one too many times and are certain there is no hope left.

It can be a great blessing to those who feel that their experiences of their life have left them as "damaged goods" and unsuitable for any worthwhile use. Witness the Apostle Paul. Exhibit A of God's grace.

Thirdly, I want you to see here not only God's grace toward Paul, in spite of who he was and God's grace toward Paul *because* of who he was, but I also want you to see Paul's unwavering commitment in the midst of all this - to seeing that God alone was honored in and through his life. (Read vs 17 again).

This is, in Christian tribal language, a DOXOLOGY - a verbal explosion of words meant to give honor to God. Paul is known for doing this from time to time. As he goes along he will suddenly be overwhelmed with the greatness and majesty of God and he simply *must speak about it*. He can't help himself. That's sort of what's happening here. That's perhaps the most defining characteristic of *doxology* - it's spontaneous, almost involuntary nature.

And Paul's words of praise here bring the focus and attention solidly upon the Lord. That is where he wants his readers to end up. That is the thought he wants you to dwell upon. Even though he has been talking about his own life and reflecting upon his own past, he does not in any way glamorize that past. Which is a stark contrast to what sometimes happens in our own day when Christians talk about their life before Christ.

More times than I care to remember I have been in attendance at a conference and one of the featured speakers will stand up and start telling this story about his life before coming to Christ. And the problem is not that he is telling his story but it is the way he is telling his story. His former life is glamorized. It's depicted as witty, funny,

daring, wild and crazy. It's made to be attractive. And it is the attractiveness of this sinful life that actually takes center stage and "panders to the curiosity of vicarious thrill-seekers", as one commentator puts it.

But not so with Paul. Paul's description of his former life here is an example of a "testimony" that wants to glorify Jesus - not life without him. It is the barest of descriptions - not saying any more than needs to be said - but not pulling any punches either. "I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man" Sin is not depicted as chic, clever or glamorous. As Paul says, it was the result of unbelief and ignorance. It was SHEER STUPIDITY. And then, without dwelling upon that, or on the gory details, he moves on to talk about the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the wonder and majesty of God. And that is where he wants you and I to go, as well. "Now to the King, eternal immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever...."