

The Chief of Sinners

Scripture Text: 1 Timothy 1:12–17

Location: Hopkins Chapel

Introduction

The gospel (good news) of Jesus Christ is death and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins, so that whosoever will repent of sin and trust in Christ for salvation, will be saved. That is a powerful truth! If you have accepted that truth, how has it changed you? Do you see yourself differently as a result of the gospel? The passage today challenges us to consider the effect salvation has on a person. It makes me consider the attitude I should have as a result of God's saving grace. Paul wrote this letter to Timothy, his young coworker and partner in the gospel who was at Ephesus, to instruct him on how to lead the church there. Paul advised Timothy on issues at the church in Ephesus. When he left Timothy in Ephesus, he charged him to deal with some false teachers who were in the church.

1 Timothy 1:3 As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine,

False teaching is a serious issue for any church. We have to be careful what we hear and what we teach. For instance, it is important for us to understand the nature of our own salvation and how it should change us. In this passage, Paul shared some truths about his salvation and his Lord and Savior through a very personal testimony.

Jesus Can Use Anyone to Serve Him

Have you ever wondered what kind of people God calls to serve Him? Who is qualified to serve God and His church? Let us consider some of the people God has used.

Moses - a murderer who also had a speech impediment. God called him to speak to the leader of the world and to lead God's people out of bondage.

David - an adulterer, a deceiver, and a murderer, yet God made him king of Israel and called him a man after His own heart.

Jonah - a disobedient, unloving prophet who first ran from a God, but then delivered a message and saw a great response from that message.

Peter - an impulsive man who deserted Jesus and denied Him, but who later became a pillar in the first church.

Matthew - a tax collector who likely used his position to take advantage of others but who became a disciple of Christ and wrote one of the Gospel books.

Paul - one who persecuted and even murdered Christians, and yet God used him to share Christ with others, plant churches, and write most of the NT.

Surveying the people who God has called to serve Him gives me hope that He can use me, too. He can use you! Jesus calls all of us to serve Him, and it is amazing that He does. Paul was amazed that God chose him to serve.

1 Timothy 1:12 I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service,

Paul was thankful that Christ was willing to appoint him to service in spite of his past sins. Paul marveled that God graciously considered him worthy of trust (faithful) in spite of the fact that he had been unfaithful and unbelieving in the past. Paul was not suggesting that God had appointed him to service *because* God thought so well of him. He was amazed that because of what he had done in the past God would ever entrust him with anything. It was certainly not anything good within Paul, as he goes on to describe himself. Paul was not the kind of person you would expect to become a follower of Christ, and certainly not a preacher of the gospel, or a leader of the church.

1 Timothy 1:13 though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,

Notice how Paul described himself...

- **blasphemer**: one who denied Christ and attempted to force others to do the same.
- **persecutor**: one who hunted down Christians like wild animals.
- **insolent opponent**: a violent, abusive person who probably lashed out physically and verbally.

Is that the kind of person you would expect to come to Christ? Is that the kind of person you would expect to serve God and His church? Probably not, but it is exactly the kind of person God uses. In fact, Paul's conversion was a fulfillment of Jesus' prayer in Luke 23:34 when He prayed for God to forgive those who were killing Him since they did not know what they are doing. God can bring salvation to willful sinners as well as "ignorant" sinners, but both groups need to come to God in faith and repentance through Christ.

So, what was the nature of Paul's faithfulness? Paul was most likely contrasting himself with the false teachers. When Paul so opposed Christ, he had not yet professed faith in Christ. He has not yet believed that Jesus is Lord and Savior. The false teachers in the church that Paul was addressing in this letter professed to follow Christ and they still lived in an evil manner. They did not have an accurate view of themselves. They perverted the gospel and were leading people astray. God was merciful to Paul and judged Paul faithful because he had repented of his sin, he had come to faith in Christ, and he was humble. That is the kind of person God can use.

Jesus Saves the Worst of Us

Paul's conversion and commission also illustrates the **transforming effect** of the gospel in contrast to the uselessness of false teaching. The gospel of Jesus Christ is

powerful and life changing. It is not just a message of eternal life, although it is that. It changes your life now. Paul was an example of the effect of the gospel. Regardless of his past, God changed Paul through Christ and gave him a new mission.

1 Timothy 1:14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

God's grace overflowed for Paul. No matter how great Paul's sin was, God's grace was greater. The same is true for anyone. You are never too far from God where His grace cannot reach you and transform your life. That is the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. (Isaiah 1:18) But what exactly is the gospel of Jesus Christ? What is it that truly changed Paul? He made one of the most concise statements of the gospel of Jesus Christ in verse fifteen.

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.

First, what Paul wrote here is true and should be completely accepted. You can take this to the bank...so listen carefully. Jesus came to us. God the Father sent His only begotten Son to us. Scripture literally says that God "pitched his tent", meaning He dwelt among us as a human being and became like one of His creation. (John 1:14) Why did Jesus come? Jesus came to save the world. He came to save sinners like Paul, like you, and like me. Jesus left His place in heaven with perfect fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit, to come to earth and save those who were His enemies. Look at what Paul also wrote to the church in Rome.

Romans 5:8 God shows his love for us in that **while we were still sinners**, Christ died for us.

God did not wait for us to get our act together. If He had, Jesus would never have come. God did not come to save those who were good and who loved Him. Jesus came to save those who were sinners and His enemies. John Newton, the author of one of the most beloved hymns, "Amazing Grace", once said, "Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior." Our sins are great but our Savior is greater. Everyone is separated from God and bound for an eternity in hell. We cannot make ourselves right with God. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot do enough good things to put ourselves in a right relationship with God. But, Jesus was sent to do what we could not. Before one can accept Christ as Savior, he or she must know that he or she needs a Savior. One will not accept God's offer of salvation unless he or she realizes the need to do so. And those are the people Jesus came to save. He did not come to save the righteous, but to save the lost.

Matthew 9:12-13 ¹² But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For **I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.**"

Luke 19:10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

Paul was not righteous when Jesus saved him. You and I were not righteous when Jesus saved us. We were all sinners and enemies of God. What I find interesting is how Paul viewed himself in light of the gospel. Paul sincerely thought of himself as the worst of sinners, the chief of them all. I can think of many people who are/were worse than Paul, but, that is not the point. Paul's view of himself was that he was the worst sinner and did not deserve God's grace. He certainly did not deserve to be appointed to serve God in sharing the message of hope and salvation to the world. The one who wrote most of the New Testament and who was the greatest missionary of the first century was also at one time the worst enemy of the church and sought to destroy it. But, Christ came to save people like Paul, people like you and me.

Paul was amazed at his salvation. Are we amazed at our own salvation? Do we really understand the depth of our sin and the greatness of God's grace? Notice in verse fifteen that Paul was referring to who "is". He did not say that he "was" the worst of sinners. He wrote, "I am the worst." Paul believed that he was still the "chief" among sinners, even after Christ had saved him. What if we all had this same attitude, that we are the chief of sinners and Christ came to save even us? What effect has the gospel of Jesus Christ had on you? Do you see yourself as the chief of sinners, or do you think of yourself as better than other people, like the pharisee who thought he was not as bad as the tax collector? I have often minimized my own sin. I have compared myself to others, thinking that at least I was not as bad as them. Oh that I would be as Paul and marvel at God's grace upon me.

Jesus Saves the Worst to Reach the Rest

Jesus did not save Paul to just accomplish Paul's salvation. This was not a matter of God accepting the challenge of saving the worst of humanity, at least by Paul's admission. God saved Paul and then sent him out to reach the rest of mankind. Our salvation is never meant to just get us into heaven. It does that, and more importantly, it gives us a right relationship with our Father in heaven, but it also does much more. God intends for us to share what He has done for us with the rest of the world.

1 Timothy 1:16 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.

Paul received mercy. He received grace. He received a new life. Jesus transformed Paul from a blasphemer, persecutor, and violent opponent into a faithful servant of Christ, but it was not for just Paul's sake. God made an example out of Paul, in a good way. God saved Paul to display His mercy and grace to others who also needed a Savior. God could use any method He wanted to save the world, but He has chosen to use imperfect sinners saved by grace to share that good news with others who are also lost. Perhaps, God wanted to make a public display of His grace to such a notable

sinner as Paul so that other despairing sinners might also find mercy. Perhaps, God saves and calls the worst of us so that everyone can know that He will save the rest.

The point here is that your salvation is never meant for you alone. God does not expect you to receive Christ as your Lord and Savior and then you just rest on your good fortune, and merely wait for Jesus to return. God saves us and then sends us into a lost and dying world so that we share the good news of Jesus Christ with the rest of the world. D.T. Niles, a pastor in Sri Lanka, once said, "Evangelism is one beggar telling another where to find the bread." We must realize that Jesus came to save us and in turn send us to share Jesus, the Bread of Life, with others. God created us to worship Him and He commissions the church to go into the world so that the world will know Him and worship Him. John Piper once said, "Missions exists because worship does not." And worship is where Paul ends this passage. Paul began with thanking God for His mercy and grace and he concludes with a doxology, a praise to Jesus.

1 Timothy 1:17 To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Our whole being and purpose for existence is to bring honor and glory to God. Jesus saves us to make us into worshippers of the one true God. Paul gives glory to God as the eternal, immortal, and invisible King who deserves honor and glory. God is worthy of worship, and yet God intervenes personally in this world to save people who are sinners and enemies. God's love, mercy, and grace are indeed great.

Conclusion

Paul has given us a very personal testimony of his own life changing experience in Christ. So, what do we do with this passage? What would your personal testimony be?

- Do you realize your need for Christ? If you know Christ as Lord and Savior, do you still realize this need?
- How has the gospel changed you? Do you see yourself as the chief of sinners? Do you see yourself as better than others who need Christ?
- Are you genuinely thankful for what God has done for you through Christ?
- Does the gospel of Jesus Christ compel you to worship Him?
- Do you realize others' need for Christ?
- Does the gospel compel you to share Jesus with those who are just like you?

This passage challenges me to evaluate my own spiritual condition. It compels me to take inventory of what God has done for me and how that has changed my life. May it do the same you. Amen!