

June 2, 2024

THE GLORIOUS NEWS (AND AN EXAMPLE) THAT CHRIST SAVES SINNERS

1 Timothy 1:12-17

*(2 of 15 in a series through 1 Timothy)*

A few years ago I attended the funeral of Kent Jones. Kent had been a surgeon, who'd had to resign because he had a stroke and simply could no longer perform what had once been routine for him. I met Kent only after his stroke. He attended a master's class I'd taught for Union in a New Testament or Systematic Theology course. I honestly can't remember which one. But I do remember our conversation as he and I both arrived early for that first class. Dr. Jones told me that he was simply auditing the class as a means of rehabilitating his mind and to keep himself from slipping mentally any more. After each class, I'd accompany him to his truck as he'd be the last one out and take a decent time getting there. But each second was precious because it allowed more time for conversation between the two of us, which if you knew Kent, you knew was a gift. He was one of the most genuine, gracious, and edifying brothers you'll ever meet. And that was why one element of his funeral service took me aback.

The funeral was basically led by his children. One played the piano and sang while the others took turns speaking. And the testimony from a couple of the children about their father was what you might expect. They told stories of his gentle and gracious ways with them. But that's what made the testimony of one of the sons (perhaps the oldest) even more shocking.

As he started to tell what it was like to grow up in his home, he mentioned that when he was young and heard his dad slam the door when he came home, he panicked. He relayed that even as a young boy, when he heard his dad slamming cabinets and screaming, he'd go and hide the guns. He didn't want his dad to find them while he was in such an angered state, knowing what kind of outbursts he was capable of. He spoke of his mom, Peg, taking the kids to church while Kent stayed home, wanting nothing to do with the Lord. And if you could have seen me, you'd have seen my mouth wide open, I'm sure. He simply wasn't describing the man I knew.

And then he talked about when his dad came to know Christ as Savior and Lord. He mentioned Kent sharing his testimony in front of the church as he was baptized, actually noting that he sat on these very steps in front of me, talking about how Christ had saved him. And then he shared with all of us that day how the Lord turned his dad into a different person—how he'd turned him into the Kent Jones that we all knew. It was a total transformation.

In fact, his son said, "It was Dad's transformation upon trusting in Christ that was the main factor in me being saved. I thought, 'If the gospel can totally change my dad from being who he was to who he is, then it must be real.'" I remember after the funeral, telling John Curlin how shocking all of this to me was. I'd not known of Kent's previous life. And John confirmed it, saying that nurses actually began asking, "What's happened to Dr. Jones?" after he became a believer. He went from being the surgeon no one wanted to work with to being the one everyone wanted to work with.

But Dr. Kent Jones wasn't the only one whose life has been that thoroughly transformed by the gospel. In the text we're looking at this morning, the Apostle Paul reminds us of who he was and who he became through the powerful, saving, and transforming work of the gospel.

Last week, as we looked at the first eleven verses, we saw that false teachers had arisen in Ephesus, just like Paul had predicted would happen in Acts 20:29-30. And it seemed like these men had turned from the gospel and were attempting to teach the law of Moses, but they were doing so without understanding. For one, they were touting myths and speculations—things the Bible doesn't even address. But also, it seems like they were upholding the law of Moses as a key to Christian living. Instead of allowing the law to expose our need for Christ and push us to the gospel so that we might find righteousness and life in him, they were upholding the law as an end in itself. But the law was never meant to be an end in itself. It was always meant to point to Christ, which is why Paul says in Romans 10:4, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." The law was never sufficient to bring transformation and righteousness apart from the gospel. So, after exposing their false teaching in the first half of this chapter, Paul now turns to why the gospel is indeed what must be proclaimed and protected—by Timothy and faithful men after him. And, interestingly, Paul—who is almost always self-deflecting—starts with himself. He points to his own life as an example of the gospel's transforming power.

That's what I want to show us this morning, how the gospel transformed Paul's life, and how it can and does the same for others as well. First, Paul shows us that his life shows that the gospel he preaches is true.

### **Paul's life shows that the gospel he preaches is true**

As Paul opens this section of the letter, he starts in verse 12 by thanking the Lord Jesus Christ for appointing him as an apostle. He writes, "I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service." He thanks the Lord Jesus Christ for giving him strength to serve him, and he specifically serves the Lord as an apostle. We saw this last week, but I didn't spend much time on it, so I'll note it now.

As Paul opens this letter, he identifies himself as, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope" (v. 1). This designation as an apostle was one who would represent the Lord Jesus Christ in terms of his authoritative teaching. When the Lord ascended to the Father's right hand, he'd told this group that he'd send them the Spirit who would "teach [them] all things and bring to [their] remembrance" all that Jesus had said to them (John 14:26). This is what enabled them later, as they wrote Scripture or aided others in the writing of Scripture, to remember Jesus' teaching and even write true, authoritative, divine words that the Lord had not spoken in his earthly ministry. It's how Paul writes so many letters, which carry the very authority of Jesus Christ. As he says, he's an "apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God." Therefore, Paul's words in Scripture are God's Words. As we often note, to say at any point in Scripture, "The Bible says" is the equivalent of saying, "God says," whether the words you quote are written by Moses, Luke, Paul, a quotation of Jesus, or whomever else.

Obviously that's a huge role, then, that Paul was to fill. And that's why Paul opens this section thanking Jesus for giving him the strength to serve him in this way. Moreover, when Paul says that Jesus judged him "faithful," appointing him to this role, he doesn't mean that he judged Paul faithful *before* saving him—Paul will make that clear in the rest of these verses. Nor does it mean that Jesus looked down the scope of time, saw that Paul would be faithful, and chose him to serve in this way. God the Son learns nothing from others, and he is dependent on nothing to know anything. He is all-knowing and self-dependent. What then does Paul mean by saying that the Lord judged him faithful?

Well, we're helped by another place where Paul speaks this way. He actually uses the same word translated "faithful" here in 1 Corinthians 7:25 (though it is translated differently) when he says, "I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy." Again, that could be translated "faithful," as it is the same word as what we see in 1 Timothy 1:12. But it helps highlight what Paul is saying. He notes specifically here that he is faithful "by the Lord's mercy," so that we might understand that when he says here that God "judged him faithful" in 1 Timothy, he means that through the Lord's mercy and enabling strength, he has become faithful in his role as apostle.

Perhaps we're already impressed by that, that any man could serve in that role, even by the Lord's grace. But Paul wants us to see that if we really want to see the power of the gospel, we must not only consider who he is as a faithful apostle but who he was before he was converted. He writes, "Though formerly I was a blasphemer, prosecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (vv. 13-14).

Paul had been an opponent of the Lord Jesus Christ. Certainly, he acted ignorantly, not understanding that Jesus was the Messiah. But he doesn't bring up his ignorance as an excuse. If Paul were meaning an excuse, he wouldn't see his need for mercy. He brings it up to highlight that he was an unbeliever during this time, and if there are degrees of wickedness among unbelievers, he was the worst. He was an unbeliever who made Jesus Christ the target of his hatred. He saw Jesus as a blasphemer worthy of death. He sought to have people arrested and even killed if they followed Jesus as Lord. He was a violent man (that's what is meant by "insolent"), holding the coats of those who stoned Stephen as the first follower of Jesus to be martyred. He will therefore call himself the "foremost" of sinners in verse 15. And that's not false humility in Paul's mind. He was a sinner of the worst kind—one who sought to destroy Jesus and his followers. He was working perfectly in league with Satan.

And then he became a faithful apostle of Christ Jesus, proclaiming the gospel to everyone on the face of the earth that he could reach, through the agony of being stoned, beaten, shipwrecked, imprisoned, and more. What accounts for that? What can create that kind of change in someone? As I mentioned when we were going through Galatians some years back, that would have been like Osama Bin Laden all of the sudden becoming the lead singer in a concert honoring the U.S. where the crescendo would have been him belting out Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the

USA.” What would take Paul from wanting to kill Jesus’ followers to being willing to die to see more people become followers of Jesus?

The answer, of course, is the gospel—the good news that God the Son took on flesh, lived, died, and was raised for all who would repent of their sins and place their faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and for eternal life. Only the gospel accounts for this kind of transformation. Only the gospel can create this kind of change in someone. To use the language we saw last week, only the gospel can create pure hearts, sincere faith, and a good conscience that flows out in love for God and neighbor. No mere application of the law or any list of rules—no matter how good those rules may be—can accomplish that. So Paul’s very life showed the truth of what he preached instead of the falsehoods being proclaimed by these false teachers in Ephesus.

But that’s not all that Paul wants us to see with this reminder of who he is and who he was. He also wants us to see that his experience salvation and transformation can happen for anyone.

### **Paul’s experience of salvation and transformation can happen for anyone**

One of my favorite times in our small group meeting happens when the text and questions revolve around God’s provision in our lives. The reason I love it is because the night begins to be filled with amazing stories. We tell of seemingly miraculous financial provision, healings, the salvation of marriages, and on and on. And what’s so encouraging about it is that you realize that each of these stories isn’t just for that person. They’re reminders to you that the Lord can be trusted. Let me give you an example of what I mean from someone not in my small group.

Several years back Christopher and Sarah Ortiz were ready to head to Brooklyn and begin ministry there. But they wanted to address their school debt first, which was \$13,000. Now, we’re a pretty blue-collar congregation, so \$13,000 was (and is) a lot for most of us. Well, one day someone walked into the office and handed us a check for the entire amount of their school debt so that they could head off to New York. And the person proceeded to tell Tom and me that he didn’t want the Ortizes to know who gave the money, but we were allowed to tell them that this amount was half of what his salary was that year. He gave half of that year’s salary just to provide for Christopher and Sarah to go to New York—where they are now, laboring faithfully.

The beauty of that story is that as much as we love Christopher and Sarah, they aren’t unique. The Lord doesn’t love them more than he does his other children. Therefore, they are an example, a picture of what God can do with all of his children who face need as they seek to obey the Lord Jesus Christ. That’s what fun about all of God’s provision in our stories. All those stories are meant to be examples to us that we can trust the Lord in our lives. Well, Paul makes the same point about his own miraculous salvation and transformation in verses 15-16.

In verse 15 Paul lays out a general truth, stating, “This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” Paul echoes here the very reality that Jesus stated when he stated, “I have not come to call the

righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). Jesus didn’t come to save good people. There are no good people. He came to save sinners. But Paul adds that if Jesus came to save sinners, Paul is foremost of these. He is the worst of sinners.

And, again, here is where we might want to push back. Maybe we want to reason that Paul isn’t as bad as he’s saying. Maybe this is Paul being too self-deprecating. But don’t push back because Paul is making a point. He adds in verse 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.”

Do you see what Paul is doing here? He’s saying that the Lord saved Paul as the worst of sinners so that Paul might be an example of what the Lord can do for others through his gospel. The second we think, “But I’ve done too much bad to be saved,” we should answer ourselves, “Well, Paul did seek to kill Christians, was violent toward them, persecuted them, and blasphemed the Lord Jesus himself, and God saved him.” It’s hard to beat Paul on the note of being a worse sinner. But the Lord saved him for that very purpose, so that we might say, “If God saved Paul, then certainly the Lord can save me as well.” Again, God saved him as an example of the patience and mercy he will show toward anyone who repents and believes.

So for the person that you’re evangelizing but feel hopeless because they display so many sinful qualities or hardness toward the Lord, don’t think they’re beyond saving. Don’t think that they can’t be totally transformed. The Lord saved Kent Jones, in part, to show Kent’s son that the gospel can save and transform him as well. And God saved Paul to show us what he can do for all of us who will repent and believe in him for eternal life.

Nor should you think that because you’ve sinned so deeply and in such a horrendous nature, though you might be saved, you can’t be used. Again, look at Paul. He went from persecuting the church to being an apostle. The Lord does not allow our rebellion against him to limit what he can do with you as one who comes to him for salvation. Again, allow Paul to be the very example to you that the Lord purposed him to be.

But all of this leads to one more point, namely, that God is to be praised for his grace and mercy toward sinners like us.

### **God is to be praised for his grace and mercy toward sinners like us**

As Paul ends this section, he writes, “To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever Amen” (v. 17). With this, Paul ends our section praising God. He notes that our God is first king. He’s over all things and everyone. Any other god that people worship is subservient to our God. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. And he is immortal. That is, he is unable to decay or grow old as we do. Nothing can phase him or affect him. And he is eternal, outside of time and unaffected by it. He is invisible. As John tells us, no one has seen him at any time. It is only the second person of the Trinity, the Son, who makes him known to us, as he has by taking on flesh and living, dying, and being raised for us. And, finally, he is the only

God. There is one true, God, and it is our God. No one else is like the one described here in verse 17. And therefore he alone should be praised, receiving honor and glory forever and ever.

No doubt we all say, "Amen." God should be praised for who he is. But he also should be praised for what he does. And the key work of God you and I should recognize as we reflect on a text like this one is that our God saves sinners like you and me. In fact, if you are trusting in him, he *has saved* you. But he doesn't save us to set us on the sidelines. He uses us. We don't deserve to be his children, let alone to be used by him for good. And yet that's what our God has chosen to do in his grace. Therefore, our response should be to praise him. What else do we do when we acknowledge that we haven't done anything to contribute to our salvation or righteous standing before him? It is simply and entirely the work of our Lord on our behalf. The only thing left to do is to praise our glorious God forever and ever. Paul knew that, and we must know it too. So let's do this very thing as we come to the table this morning. Amen.