

1 Timothy – The Household of God

This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare (1 Timothy 1:18 ESV)

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:14-15 ESV)

To Save Sinners

October 17th, 2021

1 Timothy 1:12-17

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Timothy chapter 1. Our text this morning contains one of the most profound, glorious, life-altering verses in all the Bible. Listen closely:

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15a ESV)

Jesus Christ – the second Person of the Trinity – GOD HIMSELF – came into the world! And why did he do that?

To save sinners!!

That is the best news that you will ever hear in your life, because you are sinner.

It's important that you know that, so I don't want to take the chance of simply assuming that you do. Every single person in this room – myself included – is a sinner who sins.

What is sin? "Sin" is a little word with a big meaning. I think R.C. Sproule gives one of the best definitions when he says that:

Sin is cosmic treason. Sin is treason against a perfectly pure Sovereign. It is an act of supreme ingratitude toward the One to whom we owe everything, to the One who has given us life itself.¹

God made you. That means, contrary to what we so often declare, there are no “self-made” men or women in this room. God knit you together in your mother’s womb. He caused you to be born into this amazing country. He gave you every skill and ability you possess. He is filling your lungs with breath this very second. He gives you food to eat and He has given you tastebuds to enjoy it. He causes the sun to rise each day and he has given you a nervous system that senses and enjoys the warmth on your skin. He gives family. He gives beauty. He gives everything!

He even gave His own Son! Imagine that! What more could He possibly give?! God so loved the world that He gave His own Son!

And yet, in our thoughts, and our words, and in the things we do, and in the things we don’t do that we should do – every single day – we sin. Every single day we are faced with decisions to obey and honour the God who made us, and who loves us, and who deserves our worship and our obedience, but we choose to go our own way. We reject His authority. We act as if we are gods. We act as if we don’t need Him. We act as if we don’t want Him. We’re prayerless. We’re heartless. We give our worship to lesser things. We give our thought life to evil things. We give our private life to shameful things.

Cosmic treason. That’s what it is. Sinners. That’s what we are. Every single one of us.

That’s where we left off last week, and that’s where we need to begin this morning. The false teachers in Ephesus had grown arrogant. They were puffed up. So, Paul pointed them back to the Law and said, “The Law is not for the righteous. It doesn’t exist to puff us up. No, the Law is for sinners! It exists to expose and restrain our rebellious hearts and to bring us to a place where we can see through all of our self-deception and declare that WE NEED A SAVIOUR!”

This wasn’t some abstract theological theory for Paul. In our text this morning, Paul shares his testimony, and he declares emphatically, “I – the Apostle Paul – was a sinner who needed a saviour! And I have a Saviour! And his name is JESUS!” Look with me now to the text. We’re

¹ R.C. Sproule, *The Holiness of God*, (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2010), 140.

going to be reading from verses 12-17. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, ¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 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. 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. ¹⁷ To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 1:12-17 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

A testimony is an intimate thing, isn't it? Something special happens when a person rolls back the curtain and shares the story of how God met them in their sin and brokenness. It is also powerful! It reminds us that no one is too far gone for our God! There is no sin that is too great – there is no addiction that is too powerful – there is no heart that is too hard! Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and he is still saving sinners today!

This morning, the Apostle Paul is inviting us to consider the miraculous transformation that God has worked in his life. So, let's do just that. Let's lean in and listen close to the Apostle Paul's testimony.

Paul's Testimony

The first thing we need to unpack in this testimony is:

1. Who Paul was

In verse 13, he writes:

formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. (1 Timothy 1:13a ESV)

He then goes on to make a remarkable statement in verse 15:

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, **of whom I am the foremost** (1 Timothy 1:15b ESV)

What are we to make of a statement like that?

Was Paul exaggerating? It wouldn't be wrong for Paul to use hyperbole to emphasize his point. In the same way that I have often said, "I am the worst free throw shooter in the world!" knowing full well that there is probably someone somewhere who is worse than me, perhaps Paul is doing the same thing with his claim here of being the foremost of sinners. Perhaps.

Or, perhaps when Paul referred to himself as the foremost of sinners, he wasn't referring to the *extent* of his sin but to his *position of prominence* and his well-known past. Then, we would understand the text to mean something like, "Christ Jesus came to save sinners – most notable among them is me!" Perhaps.

Those are fair, faithful readings of the text. But I would suggest that they miss the mark. I don't think Paul was using hyperbole and I don't think he was referring to his notoriety. I believe that Paul legitimately understood himself to be the *worst of all sinners*.

But how could he do that? A theologian named William Law said this more eloquently than I ever could, and I think he's exactly right:

We may justly condemn ourselves as the greatest sinners we know, because we know more of the folly of our own heart than we do of other people's.²

Do you understand what he's saying here? Because it will change the way that you see the world! I can declare, along with the Apostle Paul, that I am the foremost of sinners, because – while I can only see your outward sins from time to time – I can see my inward AND outward sins, and I see them *every minute of every day!* I hear all my sinful thoughts. I see all the things that I am skilled at hiding from the rest of the world. I am aware of every sinful motive that animates my actions. I AM the worst sinner that I know, and I say that without even a hint of exaggeration.

I think that's what's happening in this text. As Paul looked back upon his life, he had no problem identifying himself as the world's foremost sinner. John Stott notes:

² William Law as quoted by C.J. Mahoney, *Living the Cross Centered Life*, (United States: Multnomah, 2006), 129-130.

Paul was so vividly aware of his own sins that he could not conceive that anybody could be worse.³

We sometimes forget that, before Paul's conversion, he was a terrorist. I don't use that term lightly. That's who Paul was. In the days and months following the resurrection, the Apostle Paul – who was then known as Saul – was terrorizing Christians. Have you ever stopped to imagine what that entailed?

Think for a moment of the story that we read in Acts 7. The young man Stephen – in love with the Lord and desperate to see the salvation of his fellow countrymen – is preaching in Jerusalem. He spent his days teaching and caring for widows. He spoke with wisdom and power. Stephen was a salt-of-the-earth kind of guy – so much so that the religious leaders were starting to see him as a threat. Saul was among those jealous leaders.

Eventually, they made up false accusations against Stephen and they stirred up a mob. They dragged him before the high priest where he was given the chance to make a defence. At this point, he could have renounced his faith to save his life, but instead he preached a powerful sermon about how the law and prophets pointed forward to Jesus! Then, with conviction and courage, he moved into the application of his sermon, and he declared:

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it. (Acts 7:51-53 ESV)

At this point, Saul and the other leaders and the angry mob became furious. Undeterred, Stephen looked up to heaven and declared:

“Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”
(Acts 7:56 ESV)

This was the final straw. In an act of fury and bloodlust, they abandoned the mock trial and they decided that they would take justice into their own hands. They grabbed hold of him and dragged him out of the city. They likely would have thrown him headfirst over the Rock of Execution – a rock that was supposedly twice the height of a man – with the intention of breaking his neck.⁴ But

³ John Stott, *Guard the Truth – The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 53.

Stephen was not incapacitated by the fall. He stood up, but the unrelenting angry mob began to hurl stones at him. We read in verse 59:

And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:59-60 ESV)

And then they continued to hurl jagged stones at Stephen’s body until it was an unrecognizable horror.

Saul stood and watched this scene with eager approval. In fact, the murder seemed to inspire Saul. He proceeded to track down as many Christians as he could – like an exterminator seeking to rid his house of rats.

How many nights did Paul have nightmares that flashed back to that bloody scene and those like it that would follow? How many times did Paul hear Stephen’s voice in the back of his mind, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them”?

Paul writes: “I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent opponent. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners... of whom I am the foremost.” Was it hyperbole? I think Paul meant it with all his heart. Paul believed that his testimony was the perfect example of the fact that Jesus Christ has the power to rescue even the worst of sinners.

Until we see our sin for the vile, evil, wickedness that it is, our testimonies will be powerless. The gospel isn’t a hobby that helps good people to become better. The gospel is life-transforming power that changes evil, broken, wretched sinners into children of the living God! Jesus’ blood was shed to cleanse Paul’s hands from the blood of Stephen, and his blood is sufficient to wash away all the sin that you are carrying with you today.

That’s where Paul’s testimony began, but PRAISE GOD, that’s NOT where it stayed! He goes on to declare:

2. What God did

Look at verse 14:

⁴ I am drawing from the scene depicted by John Pollock, *The Apostle – A Life of Paul*, (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2012), 15-16, 27-28.

and **the grace of our Lord overflowed for me** with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (1 Timothy 1:13b-15 ESV)

Commentator William Mounce notes here:

These two verses give us one of the clearest insights into Paul's heart.⁵

Do you want to understand what drove the Apostle Paul – what made him the man that he was and what compelled him to live the way that he lived? Look no further!

Paul carried with himself not only the victory of one justified but also the constant awareness that he was a sinner saved by grace.⁶

Paul says, “I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, a VIOLENT man, but – wonder of all wonders – I received MERCY! Grace OVERFLOWED for me!”

That word “overflowed” only appears in this text in the New Testament and scholars believe that Paul invented the word for this passage. Paul didn't just receive a teaspoon of grace – though that would have been enough. No, the grace of God poured over all the limits for Paul! It exceeded all expectation! John Bunyan was so struck by this text that he used it as the title for his own autobiography: *Grace Abounding!*

Our God is not frugal with His grace. He is not cheap. He does not hold back.

Paul looked to that old rugged cross where Jesus Christ laid down his life to save sinners and he saw there a grace that exceeded his vocabulary! He needed to manufacture a new word to try to express the magnitude of it! What kind of love could forgive a murderer? Paul wasn't just a sinner who rejected Christ – he was an opponent who HATED Christ.

⁵ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles – World Biblical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 62.

⁶ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles – World Biblical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 57.

But grace poured over all the limitations that Paul could place around it. “But I don’t deserve this grace” you say. “But look what I’ve done! But look at who I am! Surely God has a limit! Surely I’ve gone too far!”

but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more (Romans 5:20b ESV)

God’s grace toward sinners DOES NOT MAKE SENSE! If God’s grace “makes sense” in your testimony, you’re telling it wrong. When you look back on your life, and you consider who you were, and you contemplate the cross, and you see Jesus hanging naked in your place – if you can consider all of that without being absolutely DUMBFOUNDED by the grace of God – then you’re not seeing what you are supposed to see! Robert Murray McCheyne concludes:

This is the reason why many good men have a barren ministry. They speak from clear head-knowledge, or from past experience, but not from a present sight of the Lamb of God. Hence their words fall like a shower of snow: fair and beautiful but cold and freezing.⁷

O that our testimonies would never be described as “cold and freezing” as we describe who we were and as we marvel at what God has done!

From there, his testimony goes on to explain:

3. Who Paul became

Why did God pour out His mercy on this blasphemer and persecutor? Paul explains:

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. (1 Timothy 1:16 ESV)

Paul had become a trophy of grace. He had become a monument of mercy – a walking, talking portrait of God’s patience. The most zealous persecutor of Christ became the greatest missionary our world has ever seen! And Paul understood that God was using that transformation as an illustration for the watching world. That’s what God does. As R. C. Sproule notes:

⁷ Robert Murray McCheyne as quoted in Warren Wiersbe, *Treasury of the World's Great Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1979), 381.

God appears, people quake in terror, God forgives and heals, God sends. From brokenness to mission is the human pattern.⁸

That was true for Paul then, and it is true for every Christian today. When you see your sin, and you experience God's overflowing grace, you don't stay the same! You *can't* stay the same!

The more frequently you look to the cross where Jesus paid the price for your sin, the more you grow to hate the sinful things that used to captivate you. You hate that bad attitude, and you hate that grumbling spirit, and you hate that pornography, and you hate that selfishness that swells up in you, and you hate that unforgiveness, and you hate that lust, and you hate all of that sin that you see in the mirror because your heart sings,

It was my sin that held him there
Until it was accomplished.
But this I know with all my heart
His wounds have paid my ransom.⁹

Do you want power in your testimony? Then, by the grace of God and with the help of the Holy Spirit, GROW! As you roll out of bed each morning, invite God to change you to look more and more like Jesus. As the Spirit of God brings conviction and points out areas of sin in your life, repent and turn. And, as the world around you begins to see the change – and you can be sure that they will – you tell them the same thing that Paul tells us here:

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. (1 Timothy 1:16 ESV)

People *should* take notice of the light of Christ shining through you. LET THEM SEE the change! Don't hide it! And when they notice, you tell them what God has done! As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:16 ESV)

⁸ R.C. Sproule, *The Holiness of God*, (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2010), 40.

⁹ Stuart Townend, *How Deep The Father's Love For Us*, (CCLI Song # 1558110, Thankyou Music, 1995).

That they may give glory to your Father who is in heaven! That's why we exist! That's the ultimate end for which God has saved us! That is where our text concludes and it's the final piece that we see in Paul's testimony:

4. What God deserves

After marvelling at the overwhelming grace of God that he had received, Paul breaks out into praise! Look at verse 17:

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

The thought of who he was – the mystery of what God had done – the joy of who Paul had become – led him to a place where he couldn't contain his praise! Honor and Glory to God!

Honor and glory to the King of the ages! The King who made Paul. The King who Paul had sought to dethrone. The King who had every right to condemn Paul but who instead gave of Himself so that Paul could be forgiven.

Honor and glory to the Immortal God who was and is and evermore will be! The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob! The God who will never die – who will never wane in power – who will never cease to be and who has made and redeemed us to share in His immortality.

Honor and glory to the Invisible God who cannot be seen by our sinful eyes. The God who nevertheless has revealed Himself to us through His creation, and through His acts of redemption, and through His word, and ultimately through Jesus Christ – the word made flesh.

Honor and glory to the only God! There is none like Him in heaven or on earth. Who can compare to God? There is nothing in all of creation that even holds a candle to our infinite God! He has no rival! He has no equal! He alone is God! He is set apart, and far beyond, and holy, holy, holy! And yet, He has set His affection on us. He sent His Son to die for us. To die for Paul – the man who watched with gladness while Stephen was murdered with stones. To die for perverts, and hypocrites, and liars, and homosexuals, and pharisees, and fools, and gossips, and addicts, and you, and me.

John Newton – the man who wrote the song Amazing Grace – as he was nearing the end of his life said:

My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior”¹⁰

If we could keep those two truths front and center in our minds what would happen in this city? How loud would the praise be in this room? How persistent would the evangelism be? How overflowing the gratitude? How compelling would the witness be if we as a people could be absolutely captured this incredible truth:

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. (1 Timothy 1:15 ESV)

Do you believe that this morning? If you do – if you are a sinner who has been saved by grace, and if your overarching ambition in life is to see God save sinners in this city – then you need to unsheathe your testimony. We need to learn how to wield the sword of our testimony. You may not be able to walk your neighbour through complex systematic theology just yet, and you may not have the ability to write, explain and expound a text for forty minutes just yet, but you are the **BEST EQUIPPED PERSON IN THE ROOM** to tell the story of what God has done in your life.

Hear me this morning: There is **POWER** in your testimony! Power to expose and undermine the pride and arrogance that our culture is steeped in. Power to display and magnify the mercy of God and His heart for the lost. Power to flip the script in a world where everyone is exhausted from trying to impress each other. By God’s grace, there is **POWER** in your testimony, Christian!

So, as we conclude today, with Paul’s testimony ringing in our ears, I want to show you how you can wield your testimony.

How To Wield Your Testimony

¹⁰ John Newton as quoted by Mark R. McMinn. *Sin and Grace in Christian Counseling: An Integrative Paradigm* (Christian Association for Psychological Studies Books) (p. 31). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

There is no such thing as a boring testimony. Every time a sinner turns away from sin and trusts in Jesus – every time a person who is dead in their sin comes to life – it is a MIRACLE! Every time! That story of God’s miraculous grace in your life is powerful, and you need to share it! As you prepare to do so, here are three simple steps that you need to follow:

- 1. Tell the truth**
- 2. Celebrate Jesus as the hero**
- 3. Overflow with praise**

It’s that simple.

Tell the truth about who you were. Don’t sugar coat it. The world sugar coats their stories. If you read the autobiographies that the world pumps out, the person is always cast as the misunderstood victim – the star that was just waiting to shine – the hero that was determined to overcome all obstacles. But that’s not your story, Christian.

When you give your testimony, tell the truth. Expose the stuff that everyone in our culture hides. Confess your sin. You don’t need to go into every gruesome detail, but you need to be brave enough to tell the truth about who you were. Because someone is going to identify with you were, and the story of God’s mercy towards you is going to fill them with hope.

Were you a drug addict? A sex addict? A workaholic? A narcissist? Tell the truth.

Were you a hypocrite? Did you grow up in the church and spend half your life pretending to be something you weren’t? Tell the truth.

Were you angry? Scared? Lost? Unlovable? Irredeemable? Tell the truth.

Somebody else is in the same place, and they think there’s no hope. Don’t withhold hope! Tell them what God has done! Let go of any motivation you might have of trying to preserve your “image”. Tell the truth!

And, as you share your testimony, make sure that it is abundantly clear that JESUS IS THE HERO!

If your testimony brings glory to YOU, then you are telling it wrong. Have you ever sat through one of those testimonies? “I was a mess. I was a wreck! I knew something had to change. So I pressed through the obstacles, and I overcame the challenges and I went to church and I said a prayer and I accepted Jesus and I started living differently and I really started to grow and I, and I, and I!”

If “and I” marks the transition in your testimony, then you have forgotten who the hero of your story is.

If you have read your Bible for any length of time, then you will have noticed that “and I” is not the place where the story gets better! Where does the story get better? If you read your Bible, then you know that time after time, two glorious words break through the darkness with gospel hope – “but God!”

I was on a road that led to ruin, but GOD saved me!

I was lost, but GOD found me!

I was dead in my sin, but GOD brought me back to life!

BUT GOD needs to be the turning point in your story! “God so loved the world that he sent His Son – Jesus – to save us. I was lost, rebellious and unworthy of grace BUT GOD sent a HERO, and his name is Jesus! And he came to save you too. Let me tell you more about him.”

If you can tell the story of what God has done in your life without welling up and overflowing with praise and gratitude, then you haven’t yet seen what you need to see. Paul couldn’t. If you look at our text, his testimony begins with thanksgiving and then ends with praise. Not only is that the blueprint – that’s the DNA! You can’t have a testimony without praise! As we remember, we praise!

You were lost, but now you are found!

You were dead, but now you are alive!

You were a rebel, but now you are a child of God!

You were enslaved to sin, but now your chains are gone!!

See it afresh! Who are you, that the God of heaven would look on you with mercy? What did you ever do to earn His love? How could you ever repay Him for what you have received? And yet, here you are – here WE are – monuments of mercy! AMAZING GRACE! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like Paul, and like you, and like me!

So, let's go from this place with His praise on our lips and with the good news of what He has done overflowing from our mouths. Tell your kids! Tell your neighbours! Tell the city! Christ Jesus came to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost! What a message! What a gospel! What a saviour!

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

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.