

“Keeping Ministry a Joyful Privilege” 1 Timothy 1:12-17, Sermon Notes
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Morning Worship Service

I want to begin this morning by talking about when ministry in your life becomes a nagging burden. A joyless obligation

And when you hear that word “ministry” think about it in terms of all the ways we serve another in the body of Christ, and all the ways we are called have to spiritual influence in the lives of one another

So, no matter what ministry responsibility you have, whether it is service in some way in the body of Christ, or service in the form of spiritual influence in the lives of your family and friends, all Christians are called to ministry in their life. All Christians know what it is like to serve others

And I will go out on a limb and assume that all Christians know what it’s like to become *weary*, to get *burned out*, and maybe even *frustrated* in their service to others

Maybe it’s a parent who is lacking motivation and perspective in your ministry to your children

Or maybe in our service we have started to focus on why we are never thanked, why no one appreciates or even seems to notice our service

Maybe we’re struggling with why we are always among the small percentage of people in the church who seems to sign up for the majority of serving opportunities.

Or perhaps our heart has grown so cold that we would really just prefer to not have to do any ministry at all. We lack any desire or motivation. “I just don’t want to serve, I can’t believe I have to do this.”

Whatever it is, what was at one time a delight and a privilege, what once carried with it excitement and gratitude and humility, has over time become a reluctant chore, a burden, even accompanied by complaining

We’re going to look at a passage this morning that will help us see ministry in our lives as a joyful privilege instead of a nagging, unfortunate and frankly unnecessary interruption to my life

Let’s begin in 1 Timothy 1:8 so we can understand the context. “But we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous person but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God...”

And now notice the end of verse 11, “*with which I have been entrusted.*”

That last phrase is the connecting bridge to our passage this morning. Paul, reminded here of the honor and privilege of having the gospel ministry entrusted to him, compels him to reflect back on his conversion and calling to ministry

It reminds him of how unworthy, undeserving he is of such a stewardship. It reminds him that he should have been the last person on earth considered for such a privilege

I think the true sense of the closing clause of verse 11 is this: “the glorious gospel of the blessed God” with which I, *thoroughly unworthy of such a great privilege*, have been entrusted.”

So, that is the context. That is why Paul launches into the themes before us this morning

And now we can read our passage for this morning. 1:12-17, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; 14 and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. 15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. 16 Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

In this passage we’re going to see 2 humble characteristics of those who view ministry as a privilege: Those who view service to others, spiritual influence to others, as an underserved privilege and opportunity

The first humble characteristic is in verses 12-14, Gratitude for undeserved service. Notice the beginning of verse 12 again: “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord...”

“I constantly have gratitude,” Paul says. We can just stop right there and we already might have a lot of work to do in our hearts

Before we even get to *why* Paul is thankful in this context we can already see a missing ingredient in our lives when we either fail to serve others, or fail to serve with the right attitude

A lack of gratitude. When someone is sitting on the sidelines, not serving the way they are called. Or they are serving but with ungodly motivation or attitude, they will lack gratitude

It is a lack of gratitude which feeds our pride, reveals our self-righteousness, and prevents us from humbling ourselves to serve others

We would never state it like that but what we are actually saying when we don’t serve others with the appropriate actions and attitudes is this: “You aren’t worthy of my time, energy, and resources. In other words, I’m superior to you, and I am not going to inconvenience myself significantly for your sake.”

Gratitude, on the other hand, helps to crucify that sense of spiritual superiority which causes us to focus inward and neglect serving others

Notice here in our text, Paul gets specific as he has constant gratitude for the one, “who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service.”

This particular strengthening looks to sometime in the past when Paul was given moral or spiritual strength, that’s always the type of strengthening this word is talking about

You can even see this referenced shortly after his conversion in Acts 9:22, “But Saul kept *increasing in strength* and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.”

There, the strengthening is used for Paul’s growth in confidence and ability as a teacher just after his conversion. So Paul was strengthened initially for ministry, and this divine enabling became the ongoing experience in Paul’s life

Philippians 4:13 is very familiar to us: “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” The one who continually gives me the grace to fulfill everything he’s called me to

So back in our passage, when Paul thought of Christ, he is reminded of this divine enabling to fulfill what Christ had called him to

Why is that a reason for gratitude? Because Christ does not leave His people to fulfill what he has required on them in their own strength

It is often the *unbelief* of assuming that the Lord has given me an unreasonable amount of difficulty and pressure in my life so that the only option for me is to worry, or complain, or simply disobey

Paul knew that whatever ministry Christ calls His people to He provides for them what they need to be faithful.

The principle is, whatever your circumstances are, whatever your ministry is, you have everything you need to respond righteously

But even more so, why does Paul thank him specifically? Notice middle of verse 12, “because he considered me faithful, putting me into service.”

Now to clarify, here’s what this isn’t saying: Paul isn’t saying that the Lord looked at him as an unbeliever, and even though he was in unbelief and radically persecuting the church, thought, “hmm, Paul’s got some natural giftedness, he’s got some potential, he’s got some passion that would be useful in the kingdom, so I bet once I save him he’ll be faithful.”

That’s not what this is saying. First, the word for “faithful” (πιστόν) is really the idea of “trustworthy.” Some of your versions even translate it that way. The concept of faithfulness doesn’t really work in this verse

The Lord could not have considered Paul *faithful* at this point, before he had placed him into ministry

However, the Lord could have considered Paul *trustworthy*, as in a candidate to be greatly used by Him based on the work he would do in Paul’s life. (see 1 Cor. 7:25)

In other words, Paul is expressing a state of stunned gratitude that one *such as himself, me, of all people*, would be a candidate to be used by Him to preach the gospel

This is crucial for our mindset for ministry. Granted, none of us our apostles, none of us will have the influence Paul had, but all of us have ministry responsibility

And here is the attitude that should inform our ministry: “I can’t explain why he would entrust *any* ministry to me, but he chose to.”

Every converted sinner knows, or should know, they have no business being a part of the Lord’s work, whether it’s a public role like teaching, or a private role that gets no recognition

This is Psalm 84:10, “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.”

I would rather have the most *insignificant role* in the service of the Lord, to be a nobody, with absolutely no notoriety, than have a significant role and abundance in the world

Notice back in 1 Timothy that last phrase there in verse 12: “putting me into service.” (διακονίαν as in Eph. 4:12)

This is referring to his initial calling to ministry right after his conversion in Acts 9. Which means Paul’s words here in our passage are almost 30 years since his conversion and calling to ministry

30 years of arduous apostolic ministry. 30 years of dealing with his own heart, 30 years of trials, 30 years of dealing with difficult people in the church, and opponents outside the church. 30 years

That’s humbling to think about because we might become weary and get burned out in our ministry in 30 *weeks*, not years

30 years for Paul. You would think that after all that time the humble gratitude for the privilege of undeserved ministry would have grown cold, faded a little bit. Start to take ministry for granted, even resent ministry because of how hard it made his life

Instead, it is stronger than ever. Stunned, amazed, that he, of all people, would not only be saved, as we will see next, but that he would have ministry responsibility

This informs us that a proper view of self is directly tied to a proper view of your ministry. As one commentator (John Kitchen) said, “Power for service is found in gratitude for grace.”

Paul constantly had gratitude for the privilege of ministry

And you say, “Well where is the idea that it is *undeserved* and that he has no right to be a part of it, that it is indeed a privilege?”

Notice Verse 13, “even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor.”

It’s a concessive statement: I have this ministry *despite myself*, not because of myself. *Even though* I was these things

Here Paul highlights what characterized him in his unbelief before he knew Christ

And we can recognize right away that Paul would be a failed counselee in our day and age. He wouldn't be allowed to think this way in ministry circles that have integrated modern psychology into their practice

So many are teaching today that you need to ignore guilt, ignore sin, ignore thoughts that could lead you to condemnation, suppress the shameful actions of your past because, they say, it'll lead to condemnation, you'll be depressed. There's nothing good that can come from that

And they're right, it will lead to those things *if the truth of the gospel doesn't inform them*. It will lead to those things if they are considered in a heart climate of unbelief

But on the other hand, if you try to ignore who you once were, pretend like your shameful deeds of the past didn't really happen, deny the reality of how your sin once manifested itself, you'll lack gratitude and appreciation for any ministry you have today, let alone gratitude and appreciation for the grace of God in saving you

Paul's gratitude for undeserved ministry was fueled by considering who he was apart from Christ

How do you keep from losing heart in ministry? How do you keep from getting burned out and weary?

Spend your time trying to answer this question: Why did God choose to reveal His Son to me? Why does God give me the opportunity and privilege to serve and influence others for His sake?

If you are consumed with *that* question, for which there is certainly no answer that terminates on you, you will notice how freely and gladly you will give yourself for the good others

Now, for the vast majority of us, most likely all of us, the specific expression of our sin in our past lives' pales in comparison to the severity of Paul's sin

Notice how Paul describes himself in verse 13: A blasphemer refers to one who speaks foolishly or with evil intent against God. And obviously Paul as a Jew and Pharisee was not blaspheming God the way a pagan was

He would have never *knowingly* blasphemed God. (Acts 26:11). He thought he was protecting the purity of the Jewish religion

But now looking back he can rightly say, "I spoke confidently and yet ignorantly about God. I lived as one who led others astray as I misrepresented God."

Paul says next, "a persecutor." That is a word that refers to one who pursues and hunts down. In his case, one who relentlessly pursued Christians with evil intent

And the last word is a very interesting word, "violent aggressor." This is an aggressor with no thought for human kindness or human dignity

He was a ferocious, evil persecutor of the church, overseeing, if not directly involved, in the mass murder of Christians

This is the idea of being merciless, with no regard for human life or decency

This last term is the apex of Paul's sin. It's one thing to harm others, but it's heightened depravity when you harm them and don't feel any remorse, any need for mercy, when you will do it and make it a point to humiliate them in the process.

Romanian pastor Richard Wurmbbrand described his torturers as heartless monsters without any mercy at all

During one of the most intense and severe times of his torture he looked up at his torturer and said, "Have you no pity for a fellow human being?"

That is the violent aggressor. A heartless, merciless person. I wonder if Paul heard that same line from Christians he persecuted, "Have you no pity for a fellow human being?"

So you can see the picture Paul paints of himself: it is one of a calloused, hardened sinner, violently opposed to the truth. With no pity or mercy for the objects of his hatred, which were Christians

The picture that we see developing and intensifying is one of a man who would be the *last candidate* you would imagine on earth to be saved, let alone God's spokesperson

I want us to take notice of here before we keep going. There's that word near the beginning of verse 13, "formerly." I "formerly" was these things

Why is that important? Because the implication is that the gospel *transforms* the sinner or the sinner hasn't experienced the gospel

In other words, if there is no "former" you, there is no current "spiritual" you

That's obviously not to say that everyone's conversion will be as obvious as Paul's, but the principle remains: "If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." 2 Corinthians 5:17

Paul doesn't say here in our text: "*I am* a blasphemer and a persecutor, and a violent aggressor, and even though I'm still these things, God has entrusted me with the gospel."

No, he said, I *formerly* was. The grace that comes in salvation produces repentance from ungodliness. (Titus 2:11ff)

That's what happened with Paul. He went from blaspheming God to speaking the truth about God

He went from a persecutor to a protector. And a violent aggressor, opposed to the gospel, to a passionate evangelist and preacher. I *formerly* was these things

John Newton has a helpful way to capture the balance of what a Christian was, is, and will be

He writes, "I'm not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still, *I am not what I once used to be*, and by the grace of God I am what I am." That's a wonderful way to express the tension in the Christian life

Paul's testimony of his own notorious and radical sin makes verse 13 all the more remarkable: "Yet, I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief."

Mercy is pity toward someone else's plight or pitiful condition. "This was shown to me," Paul says. God withheld what I really deserved, He chose to show compassion or mercy to me

And with the language he uses here he is not saying the reason I was shown mercy is because my ignorance *made me worthy*

He's rather emphasizing that he did not act in *high-handed rebellion*. These were sins of ignorance, not defiance. Not presumptuously sinning

I genuinely thought I was keeping God's law blamelessly and protecting God and his law

You remember his testimony from Philippians 3:5, "as to the Law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless."

To be a Pharisee was a compliment in Judaism. To be a persecutor of the church meant that you were so zealous to protect God's truth and the ways of Judaism that you were violently opposed to anything that would threaten it

You can see his ignorance on display on the Damascus road in his conversion, we read it earlier: Do you remember how he responded to the bright light that knocked him to the ground and the words: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

He didn't say, "Ok Lord, I'm done resisting you, I'm done fighting you. I surrender." No, he was so ignorant and so self-righteous that even after experiencing a traumatic and blinding light from heaven with a voice attached to it, describing and indicting his actions, Paul still didn't entertain the thought that it might just be Jesus

You remember what he said in that moment? "Who are you Lord?" So ignorant and so convinced that he was on the right path in his religious zeal

Later on in that passage in Acts 9:8 it talks about how Saul's eyes were *opened but he saw nothing*. That was illustrating his ignorance. He was blind. He didn't understand the implications of what he was doing

Back in our passage, he is obviously not saying that his ignorance gave him any claim on God's mercy

Why does any sinner receive mercy from God? Because God is merciful. It is His sovereign prerogative to be merciful and gracious to sinners (Exodus 34:19)

Man can't do anything to put God in a position where he is obligated to respond with mercy or grace. God gives it to whom He chooses

So ultimately, that's why Paul was shown mercy. But his ignorance in unbelief testifies to the principle that God is more inclined to be merciful to the *ignorant* than to the *defiant*

Paul wasn't an apostate who had once accepted the truth, lived consistently in light of that truth, and then swerved from it and became a false teacher. He was no rejecter of full light

Paul would have been very familiar with the categories of willful or ignorant because of his own Jewish background and mastery of the Old Testament

You can read Numbers 15 about the Day of Atonement, and you will see this very distinction made

Sins done *unintentionally*, without knowing they were sinning, these were the sins that were forgiven through the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement

But then it goes on to talk about sins done *defiantly*. Despising the Word of the Lord. *Presumptuously sinning*. Those sins had no hope the atonement would be applied to them

And it's no different when we come to the New Testament. Turn over to Hebrews 10:26, "*For if we go on sinning willfully* (present tense verb, we go on sinning in this manner as a pattern in life)

"...after receiving the knowledge of the truth, *there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins*, 27 but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries"

Verse 29, "How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?"

There it is. In the context of the book of Hebrews, you're a Jewish person who has been fully informed of the truth, you have confessed Jesus as the Messiah, in the language earlier on in Hebrews 6, you join the church, experience the benefits of being a part of the people of God, and then leave and *go back* to Judaism, the strongest warnings in Scripture apply to that person

That wasn't Paul. He was certainly sinning, he was in unbelief, but he didn't realize the implications of what he was doing. (Acts 26:19 when Paul saw the truth he believed)

Back to 1 Timothy. And to clarify, his sins in ignorance were a *culpable ignorance* because of that last phrase there in verse 13, "in unbelief."

In other words, we shouldn't confuse *ignorance* with *innocence*, it's just not high-handed rebellion (Eph. 4:17)

If we think about this comment Paul makes in 1 Timothy contextually, it could be an indirect rebuke to the false teachers he has been talking about in chapter 1

Paul could be saying, my preconversion sin and that of these false teachers, belong to different categories

Because my preconversion sin was in ignorance. But the false teacher's sin is a sin against the truth they know

They have swerved away from the truth and have gone back to their previous understanding of the law. They swerved from a sincere faith and thus are in danger of facing the consequences

Paul now says in verse 14, as severe and vile as my sin was, grace abounded even more. Verse 14, “and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus.”

Here, Paul easily passes from mercy in verse 13 to grace here in verse 14, knowing that they fit together perfectly and are never far apart

And you can see that Paul’s view and appreciation of grace is directly related to considering who he was before grace

In other words, when sin is seen appropriately, grace is magnified. But a shallow understanding of sin results in a shallow appreciation for grace

Because in verse 13 Paul demonstrated clarity about his true condition and his actions before Christ, he had a specific awareness of his sins. Grace was all the more magnified

I love this because it shows us that a *shameful past* is no match for this abundant grace

Many of us have done shameful things in our past. Things that we hate to think about. Things that we would do anything to change or erase from our memory

Maybe even the thought of them makes you cringe. They are so detestable in your mind that you have a physiological response at just the memory of them

Notice here that a shameful past doesn’t have to be suppressed or ignored. You don’t have to try to pretend like you didn’t sin in the ways you are now ashamed of

You shouldn’t have the mindset: “I can’t believe I did those things.” It should rather be, “I would still be doing those things, and imagine how much worse things I would have done, if God hadn’t intervened in my life”

Have you ever thought about what that would be like for Paul? His shameful past. Remembering the husbands or fathers he had put to death or put in prison, leaving their wives widowed. Separating Christian families

Or maybe having both parents killed or arrested leaving the children as orphans. The Christians Paul now loves, he now has a natural affection for as a result of being born into God’s family

Imagine how difficult it was for Paul to think about how he was the cause of so much pain and suffering in their lives

Let alone all the years he spent leading people astray when he taught from the Scriptures

If anyone’s shameful past could haunt them it would be Paul’s. But notice, his past doesn’t leave him condemned or in a state of shame, he doesn’t ignore it or suppress it

He chooses to use it to magnify God's grace. It overflowed. It was more than abundant. If your shameful past is magnified in your mind, you simply can't escape it, it haunts you, ask yourself why are you believing that for your particular sins the grace of Christ is not sufficient

Because I doubt your shameful past can compare with Paul's, and grace overflowed for him. It was more than abundant

Notice in verse 14 this grace is highlighted by the couple of gifts it came with: "with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus." (same phrase in 2 Tim. 1:13)

Here we see the close connection between *grace* and "faith and love." Faith denotes both the human response to the gospel evoked by grace and the ongoing attitude or disposition of trust in God and belief in the gospel

And love toward God and fellow man. Both would be impossible if not for the grace of God which He initiates in our lives

In other words, grace *caused* Paul to possess characteristics he didn't have before. Now he has faith, which is contrasted with the ignorance and unbelief he had in verse 13

And now he has love, which is contrasted with the hatred of other people, the violent aggression, the persecution

And these twin gifts of faith and love are found in Christ Jesus, Paul says

Any religious system can help people rearrange their lives, clean up some dirty habits, give them some superficial peace about their circumstances and their relationship with God

But no religious system, outside of Christ, can accomplish the *transformation* Paul talks about here. The changing of one's nature to now love the things they once hated, and hate the things they once loved

Notice also in verse 14: *grace precedes faith*. In the same way that the sun precedes the flower, as one commentator put it.

When saving grace comes, with it comes faith. That's what Paul says in Ephesians 2 right?

Ephesians 2:8, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God;"

The grammar of that clause is clear in the original. The meaning is: *Being saved by grace through faith* is not of yourselves. Grace *nor* faith originate with you, you're not the ultimate cause. It is a gift of God.

When God brings grace to cover your sin, He brings with it the gift of faith to believe God and He brings with it love so that you will love God and love others. (Galatians 5:6)

This is very clear in Scripture and very obviously illustrated in the life of Paul. You can trace Paul's life in the book of Acts and you will see how he was *increasing* in his hatred for Christians, on his way to arrest and oversee the execution of even more, and by the time he gets to his destination he is a Christian!

No one reading the account of Paul's trajectory in the book of Acts could reasonably conclude that he was going to come to his senses and muster up enough will power to accept the truth about Jesus as the Messiah. No one would say he was beginning to soften his heart

No. Paul, like all of us, needed the grace gift of faith to believe

Now, reflecting on how this grace abounded for him causes Paul to reiterate a statement that had already been established at this point. And it serves as a transition to our next point

We've seen the first characteristic of those who view ministry as a privilege: Gratitude for undeserved service

And as Paul considers his underserved ministry, he transitions into the second humble characteristic of those who view ministry as a privilege: Praise for underserved salvation

Verse 15, "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all."

This formula served as a familiar way of identifying truth they could count on and use as a fixed point of reference

He even intensifies it here and adds the qualifying phrase; "deserving or worthy of full acceptance." It is worthy of your absolute acceptance

As if to say, you *can* and *should* bank your eternity on this statement. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners

Now, the word "sinners" we need to clarify because the church today typically uses it in a different way than the Bible uses it

We use it to refer to believers and unbelievers alike, who both have the presence of sin in their lives. So someone outside of Christ is a sinner, and someone who trusts in Christ is also a sinner. And it is not wrong to use it that way

But the New Testament rarely uses it to refer to believers. Why? Because the term "sinner" is referring to those whose lives are *characterized* by sin. Sinners are those who are both *unable* and *unwilling* to please God

Neither of which are true of a genuine believer. As a believer you are both *willing* and *able* to please God

Why is that point important to understand that sinners are both unable and unwilling to please God?

Because it informs us what happens when Christ saves a sinner. In other words, salvation is not only deliverance from the *penalty of sin* but also *the power of sin* (Romans 5:8, 6:1)

We typically only associate salvation with deliverance from the penalty of sin. In other words, Christ saves us from the wrath of God, from eternal death

And that is gloriously true, but *equally emphasized* in the NT is that salvation also delivers from *the power of sin*

One succinct verse that captures both the penalty and power of sin would be 1 Peter 2:24, “and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, (there’s the penalty of sin) so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; (there’s the power of sin weakened, defeated in us)

These two concepts are at the center of Christ’s saving work. If one has been saved from the penalty of sin, that will evidence itself in the power of sin being weakened, defeated in their lives

But salvation proper is not really the emphasis in this verse. The emphasis is what comes next in verse 15. Speaking of sinners, Paul says, “among whom I am foremost of all.”

This refers obviously not to his rank chronologically as the very first sinner, but rather as his rank as the *most prominent of sinners*

He’s identifying himself as the most *infamous*, well known example of a sinner. As if to say, “when you look up “sinner” in the dictionary, a picture of me is right there to illustrate the definition.”

Notice he doesn’t say, “I was the worst sinner.” But present tense, “I am the worst sinner.”

What he’s not saying is that I am the most prominent sinner *today* in the same way I was when I didn’t know Christ

No, remember verse 13, he said I was *formerly* these things

Rather he is saying, that’s still a valid description of me *even though I’ve been forgiven and regarded as faithful*. It’s an allusion to the *continuing sense of unworthiness* to have received God’s grace. (1 Cor. 3:5, Eph. 3:8.)

Glance over very briefly to 1 Corinthians 15:9 for a similar example: “For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, (not because of how I’m acting now, not because of how sinful my apostolic ministry has been). No, “because I persecuted the church of God.”

My continuing sense of unworthiness *now* is directly tied to who I *was*. Back to 1 Timothy 1. Again, Paul’s past was not to be suppressed or ignored. It was to inform his continued sense of unworthiness and humility in ministry

You see it was Paul’s own experience, his own testimony that gave him even more confidence to be able to say this statement in verse 15 is trustworthy. I’m proof that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners

If Paul wandered in to your average counseling center today and used this language, I’m the worst of the worst, I think he would be met with counsel like this:

“Paul, don’t be so hard on yourself, you’re forgiven, don’t ever think about that again. Don’t talk about yourself as the most wicked person imaginable. The chief of sinners. After all, God himself remembers your sin no more, so why are you remembering it?”

“You need to ignore your shameful past and the guilt that comes with it. This is going to lead you to feeling condemned and worthless. Your self-image and confidence will be destroyed, you’ll be useless as you wallow in a state of condemnation.”

When in fact, it was the very reason that he never got over his conversion, the very reason that he never divorced himself from who he was, and never got over the privilege it was to serve the Lord, that made him the greatest servant of all, and the most useful of all

He never stopped marveling that God could save someone like him and use him in ministry. Maybe that’s what missing for some today?

If we take our conversion for granted, we will take God’s people for granted

There’s a question here about Paul’s mindset and how it relates to us. Should everyone have the mindset of verse 15, that I am the chief of sinners? The most prominent and notorious sinner who has ever lived?

I would answer that with a *yes* and a *no*. Yes in this sense: A graced heart views itself as the prominent of sinners. A graced heart is more aware, more preoccupied with its own sin than anyone else’s

As one pastor friend of mine has said: “The only reason Paul could call himself the chief of sinners is because I hadn’t been born yet.”

Indeed, spiritual superiority is at odds with the gospel. So in the sense that a graced heart is a humbled heart and is more aware of its own depravity than anyone else’s, yes, every one of us should *genuinely* consider ourselves as the chief of sinners, the least worthy of all to receive salvation

But at the same time, we need to understand that there was a unique design with Paul’s conversion that we all cannot fulfill, at least to the same degree

Here’s what I mean: Notice verse 16, “Yet for this reason... What reason? The reason that I am the chief of sinners, the worst of the worst

“For this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.”

Here we see that the design of God in Paul’s conversion was somewhat unique. Paul’s conversion in particular was designed to make a spectacle of God’s compassionate mercy and grace for the world to see

That’s what he is saying here: “I received mercy not because I had earned it or was worthy of it, but rather because as the worst sinner anyone could imagine, I could be an example of Christ’s perfect patience.”

That is the distinction. Very few of us were notorious, radical, religious terrorists in our previous lives. Our sin as unbelievers was not expressed in the way Paul’s was

Perhaps some of us weren't even known as wicked sinners before Christ, but rather as really nice people

For instance, do we not know plenty of people in the world who are nice, compassionate, thoughtful, sacrificial, pleasant to be around, empathetic?

They just seem to have a little more common grace than everyone else, the image of God in them is not as obscured

Those people are as lost as anyone else, they need Christ as much as anyone. But when God saves a person like that, it's a little more difficult for that conversion to fulfill the purpose of verse 16

Why? Because the wickedness of that person's heart was for the most part kept on the inside. It wasn't visible and public and radical

Not so for Paul. And that is where the distinction lies

Notice verse 16 again, the word for "demonstrate" means to show or prove something. Namely his perfect patience. "perfect" is not the best translation there

It's rather the idea of the whole mass of his patience, the totality or immensity of his patience, is the idea. The utmost patience of which he is capable

In other words, Paul's sin required the *whole measure* of God's mercy and thus could stand as an example of *the extent* to which a merciful God would act graciously toward the worst of the worst

If you think about it, God could have saved anybody and had them plant the majority of the early churches and write the majority of the letters in the New Testament

And God could have easily passed over Paul and left him in a state of ignorant self-righteousness

So why save Paul? He was the worst sinner imaginable at that time, the most feared persecutor and enemy of the gospel

How could you get worse than Paul? He would have drove the nails through Jesus' hands if he had the opportunity

Before Paul's conversion, if Barnabas would have given a survey to the early church that said, "Who is the most wicked man in the world?" They would have universally agreed that it was Paul

So why save Paul? Because God wanted to take public enemy number 1 in the Christian world, the most notorious sinner imaginable, and make him the world's greatest Christian

Paul's notorious and radical expression of his sin qualified him to be a candidate to demonstrate the extent, the magnitude of the patience and grace and mercy of the Lord. There was no better candidate to glorify, magnify the gospel of grace

Paul's salvation, like our salvation, is ultimately for God, not us. To be sure, we are the recipients of so many benefits when we become partakers of the gospel, but our benefits are *penultimate*

The *ultimate* purpose of our salvation is so that God's grace would be glorified. This is right in that classic passage in Ephesians 2:7, we were saved "so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."

It is that purpose that is so magnified in the life of Paul. A purpose which could not have been magnified *to this degree* in any other individual

What practical difference does this make? Because of what he says at the end of verse 16, "as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life."

There's hope for any sinner. Paul says, I'm a model, an illustration for everybody in the future who will believe. I am living proof God can save anyone.

If the Lord was so patient and merciful with a blaspheming, persecuting, aggressive murderer, and all of that against not fellow man, *but the church*, then *nobody* is beyond the reach of the gospel. God could save anyone

You ever tempted to think that someone is so wicked they are not savable? There are certainly people who think that about themselves. "I've done too many shameful things, I'm too wicked for God to save me."

It is in those moments that we recognize why a *God-centered understanding* of salvation is so critical. A God-centered understanding of salvation is that salvation is for the glory of God and is sovereignly determined by God

Sometimes you hear people say that you shouldn't talk about God's sovereign choice in salvation with unbelievers because even believers disagree on it and it's too controversial so don't ever bring it up in evangelism

Well, it's only controversial because of man's unbelief, not because it isn't clear in the Scriptures

But we need to realize that God's sovereignty in salvation becomes helpful in giving hope to those who think they have sinned beyond reach of God's grace

You remember what Paul says in Romans 9:11, "for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls,¹² it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³ Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."

In other words, one I chose for divine blessing and one I chose to leave for divine judgement. And this choosing happens before there are any deeds, good or bad

Before your life of shameful deeds, before any of your sin that you are now so passionately ashamed of, God chose to be merciful

A person who thinks, "I've done too much, I've out-sinned the grace of God, there's no hope for me, you don't know the wicked things I've done."

We could say to that friend: God doesn't save you based on your deeds after you are born. You are elected to salvation before the foundation of the world. *Before* you had done anything good or bad

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. And by the way, let me tell you a little bit about a guy named Paul in the New Testament

That's the point back in 1 Timothy. Those who have never embraced the Lord Jesus Christ can be assured that no matter what their sin might be, no matter how wretched they think they are, and may in fact be, *they are savable*.

Because salvation is not about choosing the worthy, it's about glorifying God's grace

And all of this causes Paul to burst out in doxological praise for this underserved salvation: Notice verse 17, "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."

Salvation of the undeserving results in perpetual and everlasting praise to God.

Verse 17 is the inevitable response to properly understanding your own unworthiness to be a recipient of salvation

When Paul thought about his conversion it left him praising God, utterly astonished at the grace of God

If instead of this attitude, you are rather astonished at why your circumstances are so hard, this is the passage to camp out in

I don't know for sure, but I can reasonably speculate that Paul's circumstances were harder than any of ours

And notice what his focus is: Not only do I not deserve whatever ministry I have, I'm the last person in existence who should have been saved

How you view your ministry, using your gifts to build up the body of Christ, influencing others, directly relates to your understanding of and appreciation for your salvation

Stunned and amazed at God's grace, you'll view ministry as a privilege and honor, like Paul does here

"Who am I to not only know the Lord, but to be used by Him to serve His people in any way."

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