

“Christ Jesus Came to Save Sinners”

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Today, we’ll continue our study of 1 Timothy by looking at an important passage, a beautiful passage, even. But it’s one that confounds many people. That’s because this passage speaks both about God’s grace and the need to protect the church from wrong teaching and sin. It will take a little while to explain why both God’s grace and the need to stand against wrong beliefs and behaviors confound people.

Let’s start with grace. Many people don’t understand the concept of grace. The reason that God forgives people who have done wrong is not because they have atoned for their own sins or righted their wrongs. It’s not because those people had more good deeds than bad deeds on their balance sheets. The reason that God forgives people who have done wrong is because of grace: That forgiveness is offered to sinners freely. It’s not something earned, deserved, or merited. It’s something that is given as a gift by a merciful God.

I think true grace is poorly understood because we don’t live in a very gracious society. People are perhaps even more harsh and judgmental today than they were years ago. This is true for probably many reasons. I imagine the fact that we are more isolated from one another and that we have instant communications to vent our fury contributes to our graceless culture. But the real reason we experience less grace in America is probably because so many people haven’t been transformed by God’s grace. So, people just don’t understand grace.

But if you start to tell them the concept of grace, they may assume that those who are forgiven by God either weren’t so bad to begin with, or that they hadn’t done things that were so bad. But Christianity doesn’t teach moral relativism. It says that while not all moral acts are equal, sin—failure to be, desire, and do what is right—is real, and one bit of sin in our lives is enough to earn condemnation. So, we can’t say any sin “wasn’t so bad,” because it’s an affront to a perfect, holy, righteous God, who at the end of history will not tolerate sin corrupting his creation and harming his people. God hates sin, and God’s people should, too.

That’s why anyone who truly understands God’s grace knows that we shouldn’t take advantage of it. The apostle Paul once asked a question he thought people might be asking. After he explained that God’s response to sin is grace, which comes through Jesus, and that God’s grace makes God look great, loving, merciful, generous, patient, and kind, Paul asked, “Are we

to continue in sin that grace may abound?” (Rom. 6:1).¹ He raised that question because some people might think, “If God can forgive any sin, why does it matter what I do?”, or, “If God can forgive any sin, and his forgiveness makes him look good, then let’s sin even more so his grace can abound even more!”

Paul’s answer is that sin is contrary to righteousness. It’s contrary to God’s ways. If you’ve been forgiven of sin and you’ve come to know who God is, you shouldn’t want to keep sinning. You should realize that certain things aren’t compatible with God’s design for life. You should realize that dispositions of the heart and certain activities can lead us away from God or can diminish the amount of praise and honor that we might give to him.

So, Christianity teaches that God can forgive all wrongs and make all things right *and* it teaches that there are real rights and real wrongs, and that we should seek to eliminate those wrongs from our lives as we focus more and more on the rights.

And this is where it confounds people, including Christians. Some people think that grace and forgiveness are opposed to upholding moral principles or rules. That’s because in this world, many people see only rules and no forgiveness. And if you have that, you have judgmentalism, legalism, harshness, and, really, no hope. A world like that would be hard to endure. Other people think that everything should be about doing away with rules, or that everything should be forgiven regardless of whether a person ever changes. But if there were no rules and no standing up for what is right and wrong, things would descend into chaos.

Christians need both grace and unchanging moral principles. The church needs both forgiveness and rules. Without both, we will lose our way. And, fortunately for us, the message of Christianity is a message about truth and grace, or objective moral laws and forgiveness. You can’t really have one without the other.

I’ll explain more as we look at today’s passage, which is 1 Timothy 1:12–20. We started to look at this book of the Bible a couple of weeks ago. If you missed the previous two sermons, you might want to listen to them to get caught up. But if you’re joining us for the first time during this series of sermons, I’ll bring you very quickly up to speed. This letter was written by Paul, a special messenger of Jesus, to his younger associate Timothy. Paul was a Jewish man who did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God or Messiah when Jesus was alive. After Jesus was crucified and then resurrected, and after he ascended to heaven, Paul was so opposed to

¹ All Scripture quotations, unless indicated otherwise, are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Christianity that he helped arrest and even kill Christians. Yet Jesus appeared to Paul while he was on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, and Paul's life was changed. He went from being Jesus' greatest persecutor to Jesus' greatest spokesman. He traveled around the Roman Empire telling both Jews and Gentiles that the only way to be right with God was to turn from sin—to repent—and to turn to Jesus and trust him and his work on their behalf.

Paul's preaching was the tool that God used to bring Timothy to faith. Timothy probably became a Christian during Paul's first visit to his city, Lystra (Acts 14). The second time Paul came to Lystra, Timothy became his associate. He either traveled with Paul or stayed in cities to minister to Christians there when Paul had to travel elsewhere. At the time that Paul wrote 1 Timothy, Timothy was in Ephesus, a significant city in the Roman Empire, in the western part of what is now known as Turkey. Paul told Timothy to stay in that city because there were false teachers who had been affecting the church. They were obsessed with "myths and genealogies," which they used as foundations for their "speculations" (1 Tim. 1:4). They also misunderstood and misapplied the law that God gave to Israel, which we read in the Old Testament.

Last week, we talked about how those things were contrary to the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. But though Christians are not bound by the Old Testament law, that doesn't mean they can do whatever they want. The moral principles that are reflected in that law, particularly in the Old Testament, are "contrary to sound doctrine" and "the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted" (1 Tim. 1:10–11). In the verses before the passage we'll read today, Paul lists a number of sins that are against right beliefs and the message of Christianity. And at that point, you may think, "Well, Paul talks about grace and not being a legalist, but he sounds kind of legalistic himself." But Paul knew what it was like to receive God's grace, and that's why he so's insistent that people cannot be made right with God through their own obedience.

With all that in mind, let's first read verses 12–17:

¹² 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.

Here, Paul thinks back to when he first became a Christian. He said that God had strengthened him and appointed him to work for him, even though he had once blasphemed, or slandered, Jesus and had persecuted his people. Paul had approved of the death of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, and had arrested Christians (Acts 7:58–8:3). In the book of Acts, Paul says,

⁹ I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities (Acts 26:9–11).

This is why Paul says he was “a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent” of Jesus. This is why he calls himself “the foremost” of sinners. He was opposed to Jesus in the strongest way possible, because he thought Christianity was a lie and that Jewish Christians deserved to die.

But Paul’s life changed because he received mercy. Why did Paul receive this mercy? He clearly wasn’t looking for a relationship with Jesus. Did he deserve forgiveness? Was he so good that God chose to change him? If you only read this passage, you might think Paul somehow merited salvation. He says he “had acted ignorantly in unbelief” and that Jesus strengthened him “because he judged me faithful.”

Paul acted “ignorantly in unbelief” because he didn’t believe Jesus was who Christians claimed he was. He didn’t believe that a man could also be God. He didn’t believe that Jesus was the anointed king that the Old Testament promised would come. So, he obviously wasn’t a believer. He didn’t know better. Does that mean he was responsible for doing what was wrong?

I don’t think it does. There are many times when we could be held accountable for illegal actions even if we didn’t know a law existed. The law doesn’t change whether we know it or not. Paul didn’t know that Jesus was the Messiah, but he should have known that. He should have known, from his extensive knowledge of the Old Testament, that Jesus had fulfilled God’s promises. He should have known that Jesus is the key that unlocks all the mysteries and complexities of the Hebrew Bible. So, I don’t think Paul means that somehow his ignorance

wasn't sinful or blameworthy. And I don't think he means that people who knowingly commit sins are somehow beyond God's mercy and grace. If that were the case, how many of us could be forgiven for things we did that we knew to be wrong?

Paul may be contrasting himself with these false teachers. They heard the true message of Jesus and they claimed to know him, only to teach false doctrine later. They were willfully teaching a false doctrine even though they claimed to be wise. In his former life, Paul was following his wrong beliefs with what we might call a "good conscience" (verse 5). He really thought he was doing the wrong thing. But perhaps these false teachers were not teaching false doctrine with a good conscience. That doesn't mean they couldn't repent and turn to Jesus. It just means that the more they rejected the truth, the more unlikely such repentance would be. The best commentary I read on this truth is by Thomas Lea and Hayne Griffin: "God can bring to salvation willful sinners as well as 'ignorant' sinners, but both groups need to come to God in faith and repentance. The more willful the persons, the less likely is their repentance."²

At any rate, Paul calls himself the foremost of sinners, so it's not like he's trying to say, "Yeah, I was against Jesus, but I wasn't as bad as those other guys!"

And Paul says that Jesus called him to his service "because he judged me faithful." This sounds like Jesus took a good look at Paul and said, "That guy's faithful, I'll make him my apostle." That wouldn't make sense, since Paul acted in unbelief and is the chief of sinners. What it must mean is that Jesus knew Paul would be a faithful, or trustworthy, minister of the gospel after he came to faith. Jesus knew that Paul had certain strengths: he knew the Scriptures, he was an unusually driven individual, and he had a background in the Gentile world of the Roman Empire since he grew up in the city of Tarsus. But this was all part of God's plan. All of this was a gift.

And the gift of salvation can only be received by faith, not by willing one's self to be more obedient, or to try harder. It doesn't come from being more religious or more self-righteous. It doesn't come through obedience to the Old Testament law, since no mere human being obeyed perfectly. It can only be received by faith.

That's why in verses 12–20 there are seven appearances of the Greek word that means "faith" or related words. It's hard to see in English, but the Greek word that means "faith" can

² Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 74.

also be translated as “trust.”³ So, when we read “faithful” (verse 12) and “trustworthy,” we’re looking at two translations of the same Greek word. To have faith, or to believe, is to trust something to be true. More importantly, it’s trusting a person, Jesus. To lack faith, or to be in unbelief, is to fail to trust that something is true. It may be to fail to trust that Jesus can fix your problems and put you in a right relationship with God. Paul used to rely upon his own religious efforts to be righteous (Phil. 3:4–6). But then he came to see that real righteousness only comes through faith in Christ (Phil. 3:7–9). That’s because even the most law-abiding, religious-rule-respecting person fails to obey perfectly. God’s standards for moral purity are so high that we don’t measure up. And more than just obedience, he wants our hearts. He wants our love and trust and worship. We don’t naturally give him those things.

But the amazing thing is that Jesus came into the world to save sinners. As the Son of God, Jesus has always existed. He is the one through whom God the Father created the world. He is the one who sustains the universe by his powerful word (Heb. 1:2–3). But he left heaven to come to Earth to become a man, to experience the pains of being a human being, and to be mistreated, mocked, rejected, betrayed, arrested, tortured, and killed. And this was not because he deserved any of that. No, we do. Yet he came to rescue sinners.

The amazing thing is that Jesus would take Paul, who was cheerfully rounding up Christians and having them killed, and make him his messenger and even his trophy. That’s what Paul says. Look at verses 15 and 16 again: “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. 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.” Jesus came to rescue the worst sinner and make him a trophy of grace. Paul stands as an example of Jesus’ “perfect patience.” Jesus could have put an end to Paul. He could have destroyed him. And in a way, he did. But he didn’t do that through killing Paul and sending him to hell. No, Jesus just hijacked his life and changed it, giving him faith, repentance, and eternal life.

And that’s why Paul breaks into a bit of praise in verse 17: “To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.” It’s not clear

³ The Greek word that means “faith,” “belief,” or “trust” is πίστις (*pistis*). The Greek word translated as “faithful” or “trustworthy” is πιστός (*pistos*). The Greek word translated as “unbelief” is ἀπιστία (*apistia*). The Greek word translated as “to believe” is πιστεύειν (*pisteuein*).

whether he's referring to Jesus or God the Father here. That's because in Paul's mind, you can distinguish between the Father and the Son, but they are so closely associated that you can't think of one without the other. They, along with the Holy Spirit, are the three Persons of the one God.

Why would Paul praise God so much? I'm sure it has something to do with Paul remembering his past. Here he is, about thirty years after he persecuted Christians, yet he still refers to himself as the chief of sinners—in the present tense! I wonder how often he could see in his mind's eye that day when Stephen was killed in front of him, while he approved. I wonder if he could hear the cries of Christian he arrested. I wonder if he could see the faces of the Christians against whom he cast votes, sending them to their deaths. I imagine it would be very, very hard to forget those things.

But every time Paul remembered such things, he must have turned his mind to Jesus. How could Paul deal with the fact that he had approved of the killing of innocent Christians? The only way, as far as I can see, was for him to reflect on what Jesus had done for him. Listen to what Paul writes in Galatians 1:13–17:

¹³For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; ¹⁷nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

Again, Paul says he “persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.” But he also says something interesting: God “had set me apart before I was born.” God had plans to bring Paul to himself before Paul was born. God had always known what Paul was going to do in his persecutions. God never learns any facts, because he has always known them. But God chose to use Paul, the persecutor, to become his prize.

That must have been a comfort to Paul. He knew that even though he had done wrong, he knew that God had chosen him, had plans for him, and loved him. And God sent his precious Son to come to the world to save Paul, to bear the punishment that he deserved. Though Paul may never have actually killed anyone himself, he was associated with the killing of God's

people. And, in the end, whether someone orders a killing or carries it out, does it matter? Which is worse? Paul knew he was responsible for his role in trying to destroy the church.

Now think of this: What kind of punishment would you want to dish out to someone who killed someone you love? What kind of punishment would you give to someone who ordered the deaths of your children? You can imagine your anger, your desire to punish that person.

But this is what is amazing about God: Though Paul deserved that punishment, he didn't get it. Instead, his punishment fell upon Jesus. God's perfect, one-of-a-kind unique Son died to pay for the sins of those who had or would persecute him, those who did or would betray him, those who did or would ignore him and disobey him. He paid for their sins if—and this is a very big if—they turned to him in faith, repenting of their sins. Another way of saying this is that Jesus' death can cover an infinite number of sins, but it is actually applied only to those who turn to him in faith, regardless of what they have done in the past.

Paul must have thought deeply about these things. I'm sure the pangs of his former sins would rise up in his heart from time to time. He might have felt the occasional wave of grief crash upon the shore of his anxious soul. But it was at those times that he would turn to the truth that God chose him, made plans for him, sent his Son to die for him, and even had his Son appear to him while he was trying to bring more damage to his Son's church—all so that he could be saved from condemnation and used in God's kingdom. All of that is grace.

That is something to sing about. That is something that should cause us to praise “the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God.”

Paul never forgot that he was a sinner. But that didn't mean he couldn't boldly speak out against sin. Let's read verses 18–20:

¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, ²⁰ among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

Paul was entrusted with the gospel, the message that Jesus is the Son of God, the crucified Messiah, who came to save sinners. And this same message was entrusted to Timothy, about whom prophecies were made. What those prophecies were exactly isn't clear. It's possible someone had prophesied what Timothy would do. It's also possible that prophecies led Paul to Timothy. Regardless, Paul told Timothy that he should “wage the good warfare, holding faith

and a good conscience.” Paul knew that Timothy would be involved in spiritual warfare. He wouldn’t wield the weapons of this world, like a sword. No, he would use things like Scripture, prayer, and reliance on God’s power. And he would have to fight to hang on to what is true and right, particularly in the face of opposition.

Paul mentions two people who “made shipwreck of their faith.” Two men Hymenaeus and Alexander, caused problems. Literally, they made “shipwreck of the faith”—Paul probably means they were trying to destroy the Christian faith by what they were saying. So, Paul says he “handed [them] over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.” We don’t know who these men were. Hymenaeus is likely the Hymenaeus mentioned in 2 Timothy 2, where Paul says that he and a man named Philetus “have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some” (2 Tim. 2:18). If that is the case—and we can’t be sure—then Hymenaeus later taught the resurrection of the dead had already occurred, which is strange since Christianity teaches that this resurrection will happen when Jesus returns. It’s something you couldn’t miss. He might have taught that some people had missed out. Alexander was a common name, and though Paul mentions an Alexander in 2 Timothy 4:14, a coppersmith who did him great harm, we can’t be sure if it’s the same man. Regardless, it seems that these men were causing such problems that Paul had to excommunicate them.

Paul uses the language of “handing someone over to Satan” in 1 Corinthians 5, when he tells the church in Corinth that they should remove an immoral man from their church. The idea is that such a person should be treated as an unbeliever, and they should be removed from the protection of the church. When they are outside of the church, they will be treated as though they belong to Satan. It could be that they might be overcome by guilt and run back to the church, seeking forgiveness. It could be that Satan could afflict them with spiritual attacks or even physical ailments. We don’t know. But Paul acknowledges that God can use Satan to discipline wayward people, driving them to despair so that they might learn not to oppose God. We don’t know if these men ever turned to Jesus truly or if they were never Christians to begin with. The point is that there are times when divisions occur in a church and people need to be removed. This is not opposed to the gospel of grace.

Christians should be able to say that certain things are right and others are wrong. When we do that, we are always aware of the fact that we are sinners saved by grace. We should never

forget that. But we still must say, “That is right, and this is wrong.” The world has a hard time understanding that. Non-Christians might quickly say, “Yeah, but you’ve done that wrong thing, too!” And we have to say something like, “Yes, I have, but it was wrong then and it’s wrong now. Yes, I was forgiven for it, but it’s against God’s design for our lives; therefore, it’s destructive, and I don’t want you or me to do whatever is destructive.” The fact that we’re sinners saved by grace doesn’t mean we can’t speak out against sin now, even if it causes a bit of internal tension.

Paul knew he wasn’t more deserving of grace than Hymenaeus and Alexander. The difference is that Paul turned away from his unbelief and attacks on the church. Hymenaeus and Alexander hadn’t, so Paul removed them from the church. And he told Timothy to fight the good fight, to guard the gospel, to make sure that no one would bring dishonor to God’s church or distort the message of forgiveness found only in Jesus.

Now that we’ve gone through this passage, what have we learned?

This passage teaches that we can think we’re in the right when we’re not. Paul thought he was right to persecute Christians. I’m sure he read his Bible and prayed to God and felt he was doing the right thing. But we can still be in the wrong. Even the most religious people can be opponents of the gospel. Perhaps the most religious people are often enemies of the gospel. All this means we must be careful about our ideas. We must truly check the Scriptures, consult with other Christians, and continue to pray for God’s guidance and wisdom.

This passage also teaches that God can correct us, even the worst of sinners. Maybe you’re feeling like you’re one of the worst. Maybe you’ve wondered if God could forgive you for that thing you did, whatever it is. Think about the example of Paul. And he’s not alone. The Bible is full of stories of great sinners becoming great saints. If you’re not a Christian, I would love to talk to you about Jesus and answer any questions you might have.

This passage also teaches us that after coming to faith, we have a duty to guard the truth. We have a duty to guard the conduct of the church. There will always be opponents of the gospel. Even the most religious people can get in the way of the mission of the church. That’s why we need to fight the good fight. God has never promised us something that is easy. But he has given us a great task, to hold fast to the gospel. There is no better news than this: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.