

God's Grace Made Paul a Model Minister

(1 Timothy 1:12–17) I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. ¹³ Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. ¹⁴ The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶ But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. ¹⁷ Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

In Christ Jesus the church's Lord and the sinner's friend, dear fellow redeemed,

In my work as a member of our synod's Assignment Committee, I have the great privilege of helping to assign young pastors to their first congregation. It's a responsibility that no one on the committee takes lightly. We study the needs of each congregation requesting a pastor and then we pore over all the material we have on each pastoral candidate – material that includes educational background, a vicar report from the man's supervising pastor, and last, but not least, a fair amount of biographical information on the candidate.

As I read through the words before us from the pen of St. Paul, I'm trying to imagine the conversation in our committee room if it were Paul who was standing for assignment today. Please understand, his educational background was top of the line. As for service, he was a self-starter with great initiative and zeal. You wouldn't have to worry about Paul sitting around when there was work to be done. But Paul's biography would present the problem. How could a man serve who, by his own admission, was once **"a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man"** (1 Timothy 1:13) – a man who, in the name of his religion and with the blessing of the government, took part in the torture and murder of Christians who refused to renounce their allegiance to Christ? How could someone like that possibly overcome such a reputation and serve in the Lord's church?

As it turns out, the Lord Jesus didn't lay this question on the hearts of committee members. In his grace he called Paul directly, first to faith, and then to service in his kingdom. This undeserved love of the Lord Jesus was not lost on Paul. He never forgot, nor would he have us forget the power of grace to turn the sinner's certain death into new and unending life. This is the truth we consider for our own lives today under this theme: **God's Grace Made Paul a Model Minister**. As we'll see, 1) this was Paul's confidence; and 2) this is our confidence.

When I think of the Apostle Paul, I think of a pretty confident guy. This is a man who once wrote: **"If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless."** (Philippians 3:4-6). This was Paul's attitude before he knew Christ. Back then confidence was never a problem for Paul. No the problem had been the source and object of his confidence. He was confident in himself – his family name, his unflinching zeal, his upstanding character, which he was sure had bought him fine reputation with God and everyone else.

But all of that changed in flash, a blinding flash on the road between Jerusalem and Damascus when the resurrected Jesus appeared to Paul and asked him point blank: **"...why do you persecute**

me?” (Acts 9:4). Never for a moment had Paul considered Jesus anything but a fraud, a dead fraud whose misguided followers had to be silenced at all costs. Paul was so sure of it that he had made this his life’s mission. Can you imagine what that must have been like for Paul – discovering that he had been so wrong? Jesus wasn’t the fraud. Paul was. His confidence had been completely misplaced. Maybe you can imagine what that’s like. We cruise along through life so sure of ourselves – our talents and abilities, our logic and reason, our strong moral fiber and our sterling reputation. But right about then, when we think we are standing firm, our sinful flesh betrays us. We exercise the poorest judgment, we say something unexpected and shocking or we do something that leaves the people around us so confused, so hurt and disappointed that their opinion of us is forever ruined. We’re know it, because we feel the same way about ourselves. We feel completely broken and absolutely helpless to fix what’s wrong with us.

That’s how Paul felt when Jesus’ question cut him down. In that moment he saw himself for what he really was, a man lost in sin and exactly one heartbeat away from hell. Perhaps for the first time in his life he felt there was nothing he could do to fix himself and he was right. We sinners can’t fix ourselves because sin had ruined us before we even drew our first breath. Of course, if God had left Paul in that sad state of reality, one of two things would have happened: either he would have despaired of life itself or he would have become an even bigger Pharisee than he already was, trying to do the impossible, trying to overcome his sins by living a new and improved life – one that may have looked good by human standards by that could have never met God’s demand of perfection.

As it was, God didn’t leave Paul. Instead he used a follower of Jesus, a man named Ananias to share with Paul the good news that the same Jesus he had been persecuting had taken away Paul’s sin. That news changed Paul forever. The man who had once placed so much confidence in his own good deeds could now openly confess that he was “**...once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man.**” The man who had once taken so much pride in his religious knowledge and convictions could freely admit that he had “**...acted in ignorance and unbelief.**” (1 Timothy 1:13) -- a fact he brought to light, not to excuse his past sins, but to draw the stark contrast between how needy he was and how gracious God is! “I was shown mercy!” says Paul. In other words, “After all that I had failed to know and believe from the Scriptures, after all I had done to destroy the lives of the Lord’s followers, God did not punish me as I deserved. He did not cast me away from his presence forever.”

The sinner didn’t get what he deserved. Instead he got what he didn’t deserve: “**The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.**” (1 Timothy 1:14). Paul didn’t have to wonder for a moment if God’s mercy was merely a temporary reprieve from a punishment yet to come. You’ve wondered that, haven’t you? “When am I going to get what I have coming to me? When’s the other shoe going to drop?” Not Paul. God poured out his grace on this violent blasphemer. God’s undeserved love worked in Paul’s heart the gift of faith to trust God’s love in Christ – love that doesn’t weaken or waiver with time. Grace convinced Paul that he was dearly loved and forever saved by the God he once despised. Grace did something else for Paul. It filled him with gratitude and gave him the chance to express his thanks for God’s saving love through a life of service – a life of ministry.

Paul was grateful for the opportunity to serve in this special way. At the same time he reminds us that the public ministry isn’t something that you “volunteer for.” A person may volunteer to train for ministry, even say “Here am I send me, but in order to properly serve, God must call or appoint that individual to minister to and on behalf of his church. These days God calls people indirectly when the church meets in the Savior’s name and its members ask someone to serve them as pastor or teacher. Paul’s call to ministry came in a different way. In the same grace that rescued Paul from his sin, God called Paul directly to service in his church. This grace upon grace furnished Paul with the courage and confidence to serve:: “**I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given**

me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service.” (1 Timothy 1:12).

As you might well imagine, those who knew of Paul’s violent past, questioned his authority and ability to be an apostle of the Lord Jesus. That must have been very difficult for the apostle, perhaps to the point where he would second guess himself. But at the end of the day Paul could ignore those voices and focus instead on the voice of Jesus who called him and promised to be with him in ministry always and everywhere.

Through all of this God had taught Paul a powerful lesson. It wasn’t anything in the sinner that made him worthy or notable. It was God’s grace that made Paul a model minister. This was Paul’s confidence and this is our confidence. Paul makes sure we understand this!

“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.” (1 Timothy 1:15). Here’s the reason Paul was shown mercy and grace. God wasn’t bending the rules for Paul. He did what he did for Paul because of Christ Jesus. Paul is so happy to tell us Jesus came to this world to save sinners. Paul is thinking about Christmas and Good Friday and Easter Sunday and everything in between. This is Paul’s way of reminding us that Jesus dedicated the perfect life he lived to you and me. In fact, he gifted his perfection to us, to all, so that with all that perfection to our credit we would deserve from God everything we need to live at peace with him now and everything we need to live in heaven with him forever. All this goodness and love we so freely receive come to us for the sake of Jesus who earned it all for us. That means we can count on God to love us every minute of every day. His love doesn’t come and go based on how well we’re behaving. It’s all about Jesus! And the mercy God shows us, this too is for the sake of Jesus. God withholds from us the anger and punishment we deserve for one reason – Jesus suffered all this for us when he suffered the tortures of hell as he hung dying on the cross. Thanks to Jesus, God will show you nothing but mercy.

Oh, I know what you’re thinking: “Pastor, that’s a fine thing to say, but if you knew what a sinner I really am, if you knew how filthy and perverted, how angry and hateful, how stubborn and self-centered I really am, you would realize that God can’t possibly love me. He can’t possibly want me in heaven.” Listen. Here’s what Paul has to say about that: **“But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.” (1 Timothy 1:16).** Do you hear that? Paul isn’t exaggerating here. He reveals things about himself that you and I wouldn’t want anyone to know. Why? Because God is making an example of Paul – not as we might expect. God is using Paul as a model of how God’s patience works in the lives of us sinners. At the very moment you and I become disgusted with ourselves for committing the same sin for the billionth time, just as we conclude that God has had enough of us and our shameful ways, God in his grace says: “I forgive you for the sake of my Son. All is well, between us. You are mine forever because I bought with the blood of my Son.” Our God never gives up on us—never. I’m living proof of this as your fellow Christian and your called servant. Nothing but grace could account for who and what I am in Christ. And you model the same grace for me. This is the grace that has made and kept you God’s child to this day and will keep you his till your safe in his arms. It’s this comforting and encouraging truth that fills us with confidence and moves us to join Paul in this hymn of praise: **“Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (1 Timothy 1:17).**