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GRACE ABOUNDING TO THE CHIEF OF SINNERS

1 Timothy 1:12-17

By

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Lesson 4

Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners 1 Timothy 1:12-17

The title of my message, "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners," comes from John Bunyan's autobiographical account of his conversion which he took from the Apostle Paul's words in our text (1 Tim. 1:12-17). In his well-known classic, *Pilgrim's Progress* ([Spire Books], p. 211), Bunyan has Greatheart say to Christian's boys as they journey to the Celestial City, "[Forgetful Green] is the most dangerous place in all these parts. For if at any time the pilgrims meet with any brunt, it is when they forget what favors they have received, and how unworthy they are of them."

I fear that as American Christians, living in this day of a watered down, feel good about yourself "gospel," we have forgotten what favors we have received from God and how unworthy we are of them. My aim today is to get any of you who may have wandered into Forgetful Green out of there as you think again on God's abundant grace that covers all your sins.

The apostle Paul stayed out of "Forgetful Green" by taking frequent trips down the "Memory Lane" of his past, recalling his former sins and the abundant grace of God that transformed him into the apostle to the Gentiles. The story of Paul's conversion is repeated no less than six times in the New Testament (Acts 9, 22, 26; Gal. 1 & 2; Phil. 3; 1 Tim. 1). As Paul rehearses it here again for Timothy, I can hear his voice crack with emotion and see the tears well up in his eyes as he remembers God's grace in his life. With Paul,

We should often recall how God's
abundant grace saved us from our sins.

We must never forget the simple, profound truth, that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost" (1:15).

1. The gospel is the message of God's abundant, transforming grace for sinners.

Saul the persecutor was transformed into Paul the preacher. And his case was no exception. In verse 16 he says that his conversion is a model of what God can do with any sinner. None is beyond God's abundant grace. When God's grace in Christ floods into a life, it always radically transforms that person.

- A. The gospel is based on God's mercy and abundant grace (1:13b-14).

God does not save us because of any worthiness on our part. It is *all* of His mercy and grace. When Paul says (1:13) that he was shown mercy because he "acted ignorantly in unbelief," he does not mean that he somehow deserved it. He means that he had not willfully rejected the light he had been shown. Scripture draws a distinction between a person who sins in ignorance and one who willfully rejects the light God has revealed to him. The former may be shown mercy, but the latter is in danger of losing the light he has been shown and may be hardened beyond repentance (Num. 15:22-31; 2 Chron. 36:15-16; Prov. 29:1; Heb. 10:26-27; 12:15-17). Thus Paul does not in any way suggest that he merited God's favor. Rather, it was quite the opposite.

God's grace was "more than abundant" (1:14). Paul coins a word here by adding the Greek prefix hyper (meaning "above," "over," or "more") to a word that already means "super-abundant," so that his meaning is, "super-super-abundant." God's grace flooded over Paul like ocean waves that keep coming and coming without end. Not only is God's grace more than abundant, but also "the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus" (1:14). God is the supplier of everything we need for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3). He gives us the faith to believe in Christ for salvation. He fills us with the love of Christ that slops over from us to others.

Can you honestly join Paul in affirming with regard to your experience, "the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus"? We live in a day when many professing Christians either tacitly or boldly deny the all-sufficiency of God's grace in Jesus Christ. In his excellent book that confronts the modern church's turning from this fundamental biblical truth (*Our Sufficiency in Christ* [Word], p. 20), Pastor John MacArthur writes:

"My grace is sufficient for you," the Lord said to the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 12:9). The average Christian in our culture cynically views that kind of counsel as simplistic, unsophisticated, and naive. Can you imagine one of today's professional radio counselors simply telling a hurting caller that God's grace is enough to meet the need?

In another context ("Servant," Sept., 1991, p. 10), MacArthur tells about being on a radio show where he asked the host if she believed that Holy Spirit, the Word of God, and the living Christ were fully sufficient for our sanctification. She replied that some people can't get in the position to be sanctified until therapy helps them deal with some psychological issues! He responded, "That God can't do His work in you until a good therapist gets it started is a frightening concept." He adds, "Psychology didn't come along as a gift from God to make up for biblical deficiencies in these complex times."

If God's grace and the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus are not more than abundant in your life, the problem is not with God's grace. Either you have not understood this fundamental truth of the gospel, that it is all of grace; or, you have not learned how to appropriate God's abundant grace as the supply for your every need.

B. The gospel is for sinners (1:15).

None others need apply. Christ came to save sinners. If you're a basically good, churchgoing person, Christ did *not* come to save you. He came to save sinners only. If you're a person with a few faults and shortcomings, Christ did not come to save you. He came to save sinners only. If you're a person with too much dignity and self-worth to call yourself a sinner, Christ did not come to save you. He came to save sinners only.

The "gospel" we hear preached in our day is a positive message that will help you achieve your full potential or feel good about yourself. It will help you succeed in your family or business. It will solve your problems and give you peace of mind. There are even Christian books that promise to help you lose weight by building your self-esteem. But where is the message that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners? Paul underscores it by

saying that this statement is trustworthy and that we should fully welcome it: "Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners."

Even our hymn book has changed the words of Isaac Watts' great hymn, "Alas, and did my Savior bleed? And did my Sovereign die? Would He devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?" One version has it, "for sinners such as I?" (#274, *Hymns for the Family of God* [Paragon Associates, Inc., 1976]). But the other version has softened it to, "for someone such as I?" (# 95, same book).

A woman who was in full-time Christian work said in a class I was leading, "I'm not going to call myself a worm!" I gently asked her if she realized that Isaac Watts took that description directly from Psalm 22, which is a prophetic look at Christ bearing our sins on the cross. I said, "If Jesus called Himself a worm when He bore our sins, who are we to say that we're better than that?"

Of course, we've been redeemed by God's grace, so that now we're His children through faith in Christ. But I fear that many who claim to believe in Christ have no idea of the sinfulness of their own heart; thus they lack the deep gratitude for God's grace that Paul had because he knew that he was the chief of sinners. We have magnified supposed human "worth" and have downplayed the holiness of God to such a degree that God's grace in salvation isn't seen as all that big a deal. Those who are forgiven little love little. So we end up with a bunch of lukewarm Christians who lack Paul's fervent love for God because they don't realize the depths of depravity from which God's grace has saved them.

Paul calls himself "the chief of sinners" (1:15). It is significant that Paul makes this statement, not as a new believer, but after he had walked with God for over 25 years. You can trace a chronological progression in Paul's statements about himself. In 1 Corinthians 15:9 he says, "I am the least of the apostles." In Ephesians 3:8, written later, he says, "I am the very least of all saints." Here in 1 Timothy 1:15, written later still, he says, "I am the chief of all sinners."

He does not say, "I *was* the chief of sinners," even though he had a wicked past. He had blasphemed (v. 13), which is an argument for the deity of Jesus. As a Pharisaic Jew, Paul would never

have blasphemed the God of Israel. What he means is that he blasphemed Jesus, the Son of God. He persecuted the church (v. 13). He was a violent aggressor. The word has the nuance of sadistic torture. But he doesn't say "I *was* the chief of sinners," but rather, "I *am* the chief." The closer a person walks with God, the more he is aware of the depths of his sinful nature, which in turn drives him to a deeper appreciation of the grace of God.

Alexander Maclaren said, "The sign of growing perfection is the growing consciousness of imperfection.... The more you become like Christ the more you will find out your unlikeness to Him" (*Expositions of Holy Scripture* [Baker], 15:332, 333). C. S. Lewis wrote, "When a man is getting better, he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less" (cited by Nathan Hatch, "Purging the Poisoned Well Within," [*Christianity Today*, 3/2/79], p. 14).

Are you learning that lesson? As you walk with God, are you learning more and more the depravity that lurks in your own heart, which in turn drives you humbly and thankfully to God's grace in Christ Jesus? Maybe you were raised in Sunday School and church, as I was. Maybe, like me, one of your earliest memories is of the time when you invited Christ to be your Savior. You especially need to learn that you are a chief of sinners. Otherwise you will fall into self-righteous pride and self-reliance, and you will never love God much because you won't realize how much you were forgiven.

Thus, the gospel is based on the mercy and abundant grace of God; and, the gospel is for sinners.

- C. The gospel transforms sinners into servants of Jesus (1:12).

God put Paul into service. If you have a King James Version, it reads, "into the ministry." That's a stained-glass word, if there ever was one. But the New Testament teaches that if God has saved you from your sin, then He has put you into the ministry. You are just as accountable to God for your ministry as I am for mine. Yes, I am paid so that I can devote full time to my ministry; perhaps you have to "make tents" (like Paul) to support yourself in

your ministry. But we're all just as much in the ministry (see Eph. 4:11-16, esp. "whole," "every," & "each" in v. 16). None is exempt.

Are you seeking God for the ministry He wants you to have in the Body of Christ? Do you view yourself every bit as much a minister as I am? Do you view your job as a means of supporting yourself so that you can serve Jesus? You say, "But I'm not sure that I can do that!" But notice (1:12), the Lord strengthened Paul, and He will strengthen you to serve Him. He wants you to be faithful. The aim of the gospel is not to get a bunch of people to be churchgoers for an hour and a half on Sundays. Its aim is to transform sinners into servants of Jesus, who live 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so that they might serve Him.

2. We should often recall our own experience of the gospel.

We must not wander into "Forgetful Green." We need to remember often our former sins and God's grace. That's one reason we are to observe the Lord's Supper frequently: We all tend to forget His great salvation, so He says, "Do this in remembrance of Me." There are four things that recalling his experience of the gospel did for Paul and will do for us, as seen in these verses:

A. Recalling our experience of the gospel will make us thankful (1:12).

As Paul thought of the gospel of the glory of God (1:11) and how it had saved him from his sinful past, the first word out of his mouth is, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord." To remember how much we have been forgiven is the surest way to fill our hearts with gratitude.

The Puritan preacher Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680) wrote to his son (quoted by William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* [Westminster Press], pp. 46-47),

When I was threatening to become cold in my ministry, and when I felt Sabbath morning coming and my heart not filled with amazement at the grace of God, or when I was making ready to dispense the Lord's Supper, do you know what I used to do? I used to take a turn up and down among the sins of my past life, and I always came down again with a broken and a contrite heart, ready to preach, as it was preached in the beginning, the forgiveness of sins. I do not think I ever went up

the pulpit stair that I did not stop for a moment at the foot of it and take a turn up and down among the sins of my past years. I do not think that I ever planned a sermon that I did not take a turn around my study table and look back at the sins of my youth and of all my life down to the present; and many a Sabbath morning, when my soul had been cold and dry, for the lack of prayer during the week, a turn up and down in my past life before I went into the pulpit always broke my hard heart and made me close with the gospel for my own soul before I began to preach.

Do you want a heart of gratitude? Pause frequently to remember your own experience of the gospel.

- B. Recalling our experience of the gospel will make us humble (1:13-15).

Although Paul was gifted, brilliant, and influential, he was not proud. He could honestly say, "By the undeserved favor of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:10). Elisabeth Elliot tells how she once heard her young daughter singing to her kitten, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like *you*." We can easily see how the other guy needs God's undeserved favor. But me? I'm not so bad! But I need to realize that God's grace saved a wretch like *me*. It will keep us from looking down in pride on fellow sinners.

- C. Recalling our experience of the gospel will make us useful (1:16).

Paul says, "I am an example of God's perfect patience. If He can save someone like me, then He can save anybody!" The word translated "who would believe" is literally "who are about to believe." In other words, no potential believer need despair that his case is too hard for God. He delights in hard cases. If you will believe that Christ will save you, the sinner, then you will have eternal life and be used of God as Paul was.

The key to being used by God is to be authentic in your experience with Him. If He has saved you from your sin and you're applying the sound teaching of His Word (1:10) so that you're growing in holiness, then your changed life will be used to change others. But if you're just a cultural Christian, not confronting your

sin with God's Word, not living daily in reality with the living God, then you won't be used by God. Have you found mercy as a sinner before God? If so, God will use you to bring His mercy to others.

D. Recalling our experience of the gospel will make us worshipful (1:17).

As Paul thought about what God had done in his life, he broke forth in spontaneous worship and praise. Please note that the attributes of God which Paul praises here are those that separate Him from us, not His grace, love, and patience that Paul has just been extolling. The gospel bids us draw near to receive mercy; but having received it, we also realize that God is altogether apart from us: He is the King of the ages, but we are His finite subjects; He is immortal, while we are subject to death; He is invisible, while we live in the realm of that which is seen; He is the only God, and we are definitely not gods! All we can do is bow in wonder and adoration that such a Being could save undeserving sinners like us!

Do you find your heart welling up with spontaneous worship of God, as Paul did? If you can't recall the last time, maybe it's because you don't pause often enough to remember your experience of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

John Newton, was a wild, drunken sailor. His language was so foul that the captain, hardly a model of piety, rebuked him! He was often put in irons and whipped for his rebellion. He became a slave-trader, falling even further into sin. He narrowly escaped death a number of times. Finally, after nearly perishing in a severe storm at sea, he turned to God and was saved. Even so, he remained in slave-trading for a few years. Eventually, by God's grace, he became a pastor. You probably know him for writing the hymn, "Amazing Grace." He wrote Deuteronomy 15:15 in bold letters and put it over the mantle of his study, where he could not fail to see it: "Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt and the Lord thy God redeemed thee."

He also wrote his own epitaph which read, "John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, pre-

served, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy." (The above taken from Newton's autobiography, *Out of the Depths* [Moody Press] and from Barclay, p. 46.)

John Newton never forgot that he was a great sinner who had found even greater mercy and grace in Christ. Neither did Paul forget. Neither should we.

Discussion Questions

1. Where's the balance between seeing ourselves as "chief of sinners" versus "saints in Christ"?
2. Which is better, to be saved as a child and be spared a sinful past or to be saved after a few years of sin?
3. How can a person who seems to be "forgiven little" grow to "love much" (Luke 7:36-50)?
4. Is it biblical to say that every Christian is "in the ministry" in an equal sense? If so, what are the implications?

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