

Like Paul

1 TIMOTHY 1:12-16

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The Bible is a book about people. Estimates vary, it obviously depends how you count them, but there are roughly 3200 different individuals mentioned in the Bible, many are not named, but at least 1700 of these are unique individuals who are mentioned by name. A good number of names are repeated. There are at least five Johns, six Marys, 9 Jeremiahs, 13 Josephs, 31 Zechariahs, and so on. And one of the benefits of reading about people is that most of us RELATE to other people. We see something of ourselves in them, and we LEARN - perhaps by following their example in some way, or perhaps by learning from a weakness or maybe a challenge - a challenge handled well, or perhaps a challenge that was not handled well. And we might relate to different characters at different points in our lives.

We might learn from Moses and his fear when God called him to do something he had never done before, or we might learn something from Moses and the terrible relationship he had with his wife. We might identify with Esther as she was put in the awkward and terrifying position of speaking up for her people at a critical time. In the New Testament, we might identify with the busyness of Martha, the quick-to-speak-up nature of Peter, or the encouragement of someone like Barnabas.

I don't know what Bible character you identify with, and it might actually change from day to day, but this morning, as we return to our series of lessons from 1 Timothy, I would like to invite all of us to try to identify with the apostle Paul. How are we like Paul? We are in 1 Timothy 1:12-16 this morning, and I'm hoping that all of us here today will be able to identify with Paul as someone in sin, who comes to accept God's mercy and grace, who is then used as an example for others to follow.

Up to this point, we've seen Paul warn the young preacher Timothy about the danger of strange teachings, and today we continue with a personal story that Paul seems to give by way of encouragement. He is inviting this young preacher into his life, he's opening up, he's authentic, and he does this to give Timothy an example to follow. And the whole paragraph comes in the form of Paul thanking God for what He has done in his life. If you're not there already, the passage in our pew Bibles is found on page 1854. Notice, please, 1 Timothy 1:12-16,

¹² 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.

So, in this paragraph, we have Paul's life in a nutshell - it's almost before, during, and after his conversion to the Christian faith.

I. And we start with the **BEFORE**.

The passage isn't neatly arranged in this order, but for the purpose of our study, I want us to move through it chronologically. And in this passage, Paul identifies himself as a sinner, as the **"foremost of all"** (at the end of verse 15). And in verse 13, he speaks of himself as having been a **"blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor."** And it doesn't seem as if Paul is bragging about this in any way, but it's almost as if he is amazed. He is surprised. In verse 12, he is THANKFUL - that's how it all starts, **"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me...."** He is thankful, especially when he thinks back to where he started.

The first time we read about Paul (or Saul as he was previously known) is at the end of Acts 7 as he holds the coats of those who were stoning Stephen. He was in **"hearty agreement with putting him to death"** (Acts 8:1), and in Acts 8:4, the Bible then tells us that, **"...Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison."** This was his mission in life, harassing the early church. Traveling all over the known world to bring them back to Jerusalem for trial.

In his life before Christ, Paul says that he was a **"blasphemer."** To blaspheme is to speak against God, to disgrace God's name. Years later, as Paul explains his previous life, he says (in Acts 26:9), **"So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth."** His goal was to destroy the name of Jesus. As a faithful Jew and as a Pharisee, Paul would have never blasphemed God intentionally, but what he didn't realize is what most of us know now, that Jesus is the Son of God. All of us who have obeyed the gospel have made the good confession, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Saul denied that with all of his heart. And that is the blasphemy. He was actively denying that Jesus was the Christ; he was speaking against the Lord. He was acting **"ignorantly and in unbelief"** (as he says at the end of verse 13), but he was denying Jesus as the Messiah, as the Christ, as the Son of God.

He was also a **"persecutor and a violent aggressor."** His words, then, were backed up with action. He denied Jesus, and then he did something about it. He says to the churches of Galatia (in Galatians 1:13), **"...you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it."** He was, **"...more extremely zealous for [his] ancestral traditions."** His goal was to destroy the church, and we find here in 1 Timothy 1 that he was obsessed with violence, almost to the point of getting some kind of pleasure out of making people suffer. Later in life, looking back on it, Paul explains what he did in Acts 26:10-11, **"...not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities."**

So, why does Paul describe his former life so graphically? Why does he bring up the past like this? It seems to me that Paul is inviting us into this story, and he's making the point that if he can be saved, then we can also be saved. And I don't know if he's really comparing himself to everybody who's ever lived, but when he says that he is the **"foremost of sinners,"** it seems that he's making the point that what he did was really, really bad! In his own mind, as he looks back at his life, Paul sees himself as the **"worst."** He is the **"foremost;"** he is the **"chief"** of sinners, as some translations might put it. As we learned last week, our standard is the gospel, our aim is Jesus, our aim is sinless perfection. And if we miss that mark, we are guilty. In Matthew 5:48, Jesus said that we are to be **"perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect."** Anything short of that perfection is sin. And in his own mind, Paul saw himself as the worst. He tried to stamp out the church of Christ in those early years, and had some success with that.

So, if we're ever tempted to think that we've done something so bad that God might not forgive us, let's just keep Paul in mind here. Paul had a very clear picture of his own sin, and he never forgot it. C.S. Lewis commented on this passage and said, "When a man is getting better, he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still left in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less." That's Paul! As he matures spiritually, he seems to be incredibly aware of where he's been, and he sees himself as the **"foremost"** of sinners.

So again, why does Paul share this? Well, as we read this passage, he obviously shares something of his past life to introduce the idea of forgiveness, to introduce God's grace and mercy! Grace makes no sense without understanding what we have been saved from. He's looking back, then, not because he misses his former life - that's what Lot's wife did - she looked back longingly, in sorrow, at what she was losing. That's not what Paul is doing here. Instead, Paul looks back for the purpose of thanking God. Remember: That's how this passage starts, **"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord...."** So, there's some thankfulness here, but as we'll learn in a bit, there's also some encouragement. As Jesus said in Luke 5:31-32, **"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."** Without sin in his life, Paul would not have needed Jesus in the first place. So, here at the beginning, Paul is confessing this sin in his life.

II. And this leads us to what comes next, as we now find that Paul is SHOWN MERCY.

He was **"shown mercy...and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant,"** he says. Saved by grace! Saved by God's mercy! Grace is the idea of a gift, something good that happens to us, something amazing that is given to us. And this grace is **"more than abundant."** Apparently, the word for **"abundant"** or **"overflowing"** has the prefix "hyper" on it. We think about a hyper-active kid or hyper-sensitive person. It's the idea of "above and beyond." God's gift of grace to Paul was **"more than abundant."** So, grace is getting what we don't deserve. Mercy, on the other hand, is the idea of not getting the punishment we do deserve. And that reminds us that Paul was behaving like an enemy to God at this point. Paul was actively working to persecute the church. Paul was dragging people out of their homes. Paul was a blasphemer, a persecutor, a violent aggressor. He deserved God's wrath and judgment, but he was **"shown mercy"** instead. Grace and mercy. Nobody can legitimately demand a gift (otherwise it's not a gift)! Nobody can legitimately demand mercy (otherwise it's not mercy)!

We actually have the account of Paul's conversion in Acts 9, **"Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them**

bound to Jerusalem.” But on his way to Damascus, Jesus appears in a blinding light, telling him to continue on to Damascus and to wait to be told what to do. He obeys, going three days without food and praying. In the meantime, God arranges for a certain disciple named Ananias to get in touch with Saul, he does, and on that third day, Ananias shows up and says, ***“Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name”*** (Acts 22:16). And at that point, Paul is baptized. I bring these passages together so we understand that Saul (whose name was later changed to Paul) was saved by God’s grace and mercy. God went looking for Paul, not the other way around, when Paul had done nothing to deserve it. In fact, Paul was actively persecuting the church at that time. Paul was God’s “enemy,” as Jason read for us in Romans 5.

At the same time, we also need to realize that Paul had to respond to God’s grace. Paul had to accept it. Paul had to do what Ananias commanded him to do. Sometimes people have the idea that Paul was saved on the road to Damascus, that he was saved when he saw the light, when he saw Jesus on the road. But that is not what happened. Paul saw the Lord, Jesus asked him why he was persecuting him, and God then let that sink in a few days. Sometimes we really need to appreciate the gravity of what we’ve done. A lot of people today would say that Paul was saved on the road or that he was saved as a result of prayer and fasting, but that really isn’t the case. I have a hard time even imagining what those three days must have been like. I’m on my way to throw people in jail for being Christians, Jesus shows up and basically says “What you’re doing to them you’re actually doing to me,” he is blinded and led by the hand, and here he is blind, in a strange place, far away from home, knowing that he has been blaspheming and violently aggressive toward God himself. I would emphasize that once he recognizes that Jesus really is the Son of God, Paul repents of his sins; that is, he immediately stops persecuting Christians. But in that 3-day period, I cannot imagine the terror this man must have felt. He is not okay with God. But he prays, and at the end of those three days Paul is then told to get up and to be baptized, for the purpose of washing away his sins. And he obeys, immediately. He doesn’t save himself. God does the saving. God is the one who pours out the grace and mercy, and it is Paul who responds with obedience, calling out to God in the act of baptism. This sadistic man obsessed with violence is forgiven.

John Newton is the former slave trader who wrote the song *Amazing Grace*, and at one point in his life, he said, “When I get to heaven I shall see three wonders there. The first wonder will be, to see many people there whom I did not expect to see. The second wonder will be, to miss many people who I did expect to see. And the third and greatest wonder of all, will be to find myself there.” That last part seems to be what Paul is saying here: He is saved by grace, and he is thankful for it. He is amazed by it. He is amazed that God had strengthened him and put him into service. He is amazed by the transition.

By sharing his past, Paul, then, is able to encourage others. No matter what we have done, God offers forgiveness.

III. All of this brings us to the reason why this passage is in the Bible: Paul’s past and God’s grace make Paul an **EXAMPLE**, a **PATTERN**.

Starting in verse 15, we have one of several ***“trustworthy statements”*** that are scattered throughout Paul’s letters. So, this is really important.

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.

Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners. We live in a hyper-tolerant world. And as they try to tolerate Jesus, many people around us will acknowledge that Jesus really lived, but that he was just a good teacher. However, Paul says something amazing here, that Jesus ***“came into the world to save sinners.”*** Jesus made a decision to be born! You might have noticed on the news a few weeks ago that a man is suing his parents because he didn’t ask to be born. They did not get his permission before he was born! That’s just messed up. But think about what Paul is saying about Jesus here. Jesus is the one person in all of history who DID decide to be born! ***“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”*** So when people say that Jesus is a good teacher, but not the Son of God, they are denying that he did what Paul says that he did here. He existed before he came to this earth, and he came here for a purpose - to save sinners. So when people try to dismiss Jesus as nothing but a good teacher, we need to remember that he is so much more than that. He came here for the purpose of saving us from sin - he came here to offer his life in our place, as a sacrifice.

And in this passage, we see that he saved Paul, the worst of all sinners, as something of an ***“example,”*** a template, a pattern, a prototype. Some of you know that a few years ago I got to tour the Subaru factory down in Lafayette, Indiana, and it was a great experience. But one of the highlights was seeing the first car ever made at that factory. It was a Subaru Legacy made back in September 1989! That was my last year in high school! So, this car rolls off the line in 1989, they park it in the entryway, and it has been there ever since. It was the strangest thing to see this car that was nearly 30 years old, but in absolutely perfect condition. But they leave it there as something of an example. This is what we have done. This is what we do here. In the same way, Paul is saying, God showed me mercy as an example. If he can save me, then he can also save you!

Paul persecuted the church. What have you done? Adultery? Homosexuality? Living together in a sexual relationship without being married? Drug abuse? Prostitution? Whatever we can imagine, God’s grace and mercy can cover it, if we are willing to turn away from those sins and back to God, if we are willing to believe and obey. We think of what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11,

⁹ Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals,¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.¹¹ Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

Paul, then, is an ***“example”*** of God’s patience. If God can save Paul, he can also save us.

Conclusion:

We started this morning by thinking about characters in the Bible. God could have reached out to us with nothing but a list of rules: This is what you need to do. He could have made it something like the Ten Commandments, and he could have left it like that, a simple list. But instead, he tells us about people. He warns and he encourages, but he also gives us examples. This book is an account of people, and many times they are people like us. Paul is one of those. He sinned. He did some terrible things. But, God reaches out with mercy and grace. And Paul responds to that offer. He comes to believe in Jesus as the Son of God, he turns away from his sins, and he is baptized (immersed in water) for the forgiveness of his sins. He is born into the family of God and never regrets making that decision.

If you are a Christian like I am, Paul’s story is our story. Like Paul, we thank God for putting us into service. But

if you haven't yet obeyed the gospel, you are still in here somewhere. Maybe you're living in sin right now. Maybe you've made some good changes the past few months or years, but you still haven't followed Paul's example here. You might be in that three-day waiting period - not literally, but you might know who Jesus is, you know that you've sinned, you've made some good changes already, but you still feel guilty. We can be "like Paul." If we've sinned, God will forgive. Our mission as individuals and as a group is to get the word out. So if there's anything we can do to help, we want you to let us know. If you have any questions or concerns, let's sit down with an open Bible, and let's study. But if you are ready to obey this good news right now, you can let us know now, as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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