

Pentecost 14 “Jesus Came to Save Sinners” 1 Timothy 1 15

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

We immerse ourselves for the next few weeks in Paul’s first letter to Timothy. As you read it, understand that it was not probably intended only for Timothy’s ears, but also for the congregation in Ephesus which he was being sent to serve. It would have been read at his installation. Can you imagine being there for his installation? What would have that sounded like to you and to the people he served?

I think that the post-modern church needs to hear and really take to heart the first part of this reading which we omitted, verses 3-11. I will read them to you now:

³ I urged you...that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, ⁴ nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. ⁵ The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. ⁶ Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, ⁷ desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions. ⁸ Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, ⁹ understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰ the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, ¹¹ in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.

In our quest for truth in the 21st century we have often made far too many confident assertions of the truth. This has led us to believe that we have it and others do not. The arrogance of that sort of thinking and doing is exceptionally off-putting to people today.

They are not usually attracted to such a church, although, I have to admit, that a population of such people continues to this day. Will we thrive by providing ever more specific answers to questions, or will we sometime have to admit we don't know?

For the theme of this Sunday, however, we will focus on the line which we all know well. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst. If you look, you will see that is represented on the bulletin front cover. This is not just Paul speaking with hyperbole; he really means this. And indeed, all of us can join him in this assertion. This is a trustworthy and true saying for every one of us. That is a phrase Paul uses five times to draw attention to and emphasize an important point.

Now, I know **some** of your sins, but I know a lot more of mine. When I look around me and consider all the folks I know, the biggest sinner I know is always the one who looks back at me from the bathroom mirror. I am the greatest of sinners from a purely existential point of view. I am no mass murderer, but what I find boiling down inside my own heart and head does not exactly encourage me to say that I am any better.

Paul's assertion that he is the greatest of sinners will be essential to the Gospel lesson today. Paul received mercy and so did we in order that the perfect patience of Jesus might be shown and some may come to believe in Him for eternal life. That is the governing motif of our lives. Thus, I have to say that Rick Warren is a piker with his 40 days of purpose! It is a whole life of purpose to which we are called. Our whole life is a giant illustration of God's mercy and grace. Paul had indeed been a persecutor of God's people. But that only now served to make God's graciousness and mercy greater and more glorious.

You see, Paul is writing to a young pastor, an under-shepherd, and Paul is really embodying the very thing that Jesus is aiming for in the Gospel reading. He was a Pharisee. He did not think that any prophet or teacher of God should be hanging around with the sinners and tax collectors. He went to terrible lengths to persecute such people, and yet God knocked him off his own two feet and laid him flat on the ground.

God turned him around and made him into the very exemplar of the scandalous grace of God which had so angered him. God does the same to many of us today. He lets us reap the consequences of our rebellion against Him and our bad decision-making...shall we call it by its name: **sin**. We sometimes get knocked off our feet, leveled, devastated, to the point we can't get up. Yet Jesus has already died for those sins and is waiting to pick us up and walk with us.

Paul offers himself as a living example of the saving mercy of God in Christ. Paul admits that he was anything but "faithful." But Christ is the one who gives Paul strength, who decided to use Paul for ministry or service. The same Christ now keeps displaying His perfect patience, using Paul as an example. The emphasis is constantly on Christ and His mercy, grace, patience—in short, on His salvation. Paul's unworthiness, though real enough, fades into the background and serves only to glorify Christ's mercy. Paul's new post-conversion obedience is also not the point; now Christ takes center stage and does everything that matters.

Paul's graphic list of the kind of sinful people for whom the law is intended (especially vv. 9–10) may capture the spotlight. But we should not try to make this about various kinds of really horrible human sin, for they are legion. Rather, we should focus our eyes on God's "overflowing" mercy and grace (v. 14) and His "trustworthy" (v. 15) Gospel promises.

Today's hearers, sensitized by public and political debate over matters such as homosexuality and abortion, may resonate to the old parody of a hymn: "Chief of sinners though I be / you-know-who is worse than me!" And "you-know-who" can easily be identified with proponents of gay marriage, or politicians who vote for late-term abortions, or whatever villains are the focus of the current insatiable news cycle. In other words, the longer version of the pericope seems to invite a comparison between "certain persons" (v. 6) and Paul. Such a comparison between sinners to decide which is "worse" is certainly not the point Paul wants us to grasp. But once we entertain such a comparison, we may not readily be convinced that Paul, the former blasphemer and "insolent opponent," really is in any sense "foremost" of the sinners that Christ came into the world to save (v. 15).

The murderers, fornicators, perjurers, human traffickers, etc. all seem much, much worse, by our modern standards, than Paul's pre-conversion behavior. It is too tempting for us, perhaps, to gloss quickly over the oft-thought "merely" religious (!) sins of unbelief and blasphemy and condemn the so-called "really" egregious and wicked violations of the commandments of the second table of the law, about how we relate to one another, rather than how we relate to God.

And yet Paul confesses himself as the "foremost" (literally "first") sinner, and we should not discount his words as mere hyperbole or modesty. Our contemporary estimates of which sins are "worse" are frequently distorted or just plain wrong. Paul's unbelief and opposition to Christ and his followers were horrible, damning sins against the first and second commandments.

And we should also be wary of locating Paul's sins simply in his pre-conversion life. Paul does not thank the Lord that he is no longer such a bad sinner as he was before. He does not say, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I **was** the foremost," but rather "of whom **I am** the foremost." The verb tense is present, and the pronoun "I" is emphatic. We must not imagine that mercy, grace, and salvation were simply past necessities that corrected Paul's previous ignorance and let him start over.

The saving mercy of Christ Jesus our Lord is the present and continuous reality in which Paul now lives and serves as "exhibit A" of Christ's perfect patience. The same present reality of sin—and even more of God's grace—comes through in Romans 7, where Paul writes about his struggle with the sin that still clings to him, but rejoices in victory in Christ.

We should notice the contrast between what the law is for (v. 9), that is to convict sinners, and what "the glorious *gospel*" (v. 11) does and shows, that is to conform us to God's love and redemption. The law reveals and condemns sins in all its horror and vileness. But the gospel shows us Christ: His mercy, His patience, His forgiveness, His absolutely trustworthy promise of salvation and eternal life. With such a clear, unwavering focus on Jesus Christ, no room is left to quibble about greater or lesser sins.

We look once more at Paul's words to Timothy in verses 12-15:

I thank him **who has given me strength**, Christ Jesus our Lord, because **he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service**, though formerly **I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent**. But **I received mercy** because **I had acted ignorantly in unbelief**, and **the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus**. 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**.

Paul confesses that he is a poor miserable sinner: a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent of Christ. In return, he receives the forgiveness, life, and salvation won for him by Christ's death and resurrection. God's grace, mercy, and love overflowed on him and he was strengthened in faith.

Our own sins are always the worst, for only our own sins can damn us. Thanks be to Christ who saves sinners—even us! For God promises **us** that if **we** confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. All honor and glory belong to the only God, the King of ages, forever and ever. Amen!

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting.