

Eyes to See: My Sin and God's Glories  
1 Timothy 1:12-17  
Tim Becker – December 15, 2019

## 1. Introduction

Christmas is coming. You've probably heard the jingle, "Jesus is the reason for the season." It's true. Christmas is filled with meaning for us. And I'm guessing that most of us here this morning believe that the meaning is rooted in Jesus' coming. For Christians, Christmas is the once a year, every year, celebration of Jesus' coming to earth, being born as a human baby.

But why did Jesus come into the world? If you'd ask your children or your neighbors or your coworkers, what would they say? They might say that Jesus came into the world to bring love. Or to unite families. Others might think, even if they don't say it, that Jesus came into the world so we could have warm family gatherings, with a Christmas tree and presents and delicious Christmas dinners. If we are honest, most of us would admit that it's not so easy for us to place our highest Christmas joys on Jesus instead of these other things.

Christmas is a wonderful time of year. It is a gift from God. And Christmas celebrates Jesus' coming into the world as a baby. But why did he come? And how can we be helped to find our highest Christmas joys satisfied by his coming instead of by other things? Please open your Bibles to 1 Tim 1:12-17. This passage has marvelous help for us from God. Please follow along as I read.

1 Ti 1:12–17 : <sup>12</sup> I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, <sup>13</sup> though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, <sup>14</sup> and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

In this passage, Paul is letting us in on his inner thoughts about Christ Jesus coming into the world and how this relates to him personally.

Two aspects of this passage are particularly striking. The first is Paul's seemingly spontaneous breaking into praise of God at the end, in v. 17. This doesn't happen near often enough in my life. How about you? When was the last time you just stopped in the middle of something you were doing and said something like Paul did here: God you are

the King of the ages, to you belong all honor and glory forever and ever!” Can we be helped by Paul's example? Paul’s spontaneous praise of God is striking.

The second striking aspect of this passage is Paul's view of himself as the foremost of sinners. He brings it up twice.

We will see that these two aspects of the passage, Paul’s exuberant praise of God and Paul’s view of himself as the foremost of sinners, these two are related. Let's begin by looking at the way Paul views himself as a sinner.

## 2. Paul Highlights His Worst Sins

Paul was a sinner just like you and me. He could have easily named common sins. He could have said that he was a proud man. He could have said that he was often impatient or unkind or angry. He could have said that he frequently lusted for food or sex or comfort. If he had merely named common sins, he wouldn't have made himself stand out. Just like you and me, he could have hidden inconspicuously among the crowd and said, “Yeah I sin, but no worse than others.” But he doesn't want to look back on his former way and see himself as an ordinary sinner. Why? Because he wants to let God's light of truth shine brightly on his past life. So, he names his worst sins, the ones that are the greatest offense to the holy God who created him. He says in v. 13, “Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.”

These sins reflect back on his role in persecuting the church. Acts 8:1 records that Paul “approved of” the “execution” of Stephen. Stephen was the first Christian martyr. Paul not only passively approved, but he passionately opposed those “belonging to the Way” (Acts 9:2). “Saul [this was Paul’s name then] was ravaging the church.” He entered house after house, dragging off men and women and committing them to prison” (Acts 8:3). And he was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord”(Acts 9:1). Then going one step further, when confronted with a “light from heaven,” Jesus himself tells Paul, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). So, here in 1 Tim 1:13, Paul is openly admitting to himself and to all others who would read this letter that he arrogantly abused Christians, persecuted Christ, and blasphemed the Son of God.

In Paul's mind, these were his greatest sins. They were a direct and wicked assault on the kingdom of God, on the kindness of Christ, and on the worth of Christ’s bride, the church. When Paul considers these, he does not see himself as an ordinary sinner.

We, on the other hand, are tempted to downplay our sins, to make ourselves out to be ordinary, normal, sinners. Or more likely, if we are honest with ourselves, just a bit better than others. But Paul sees himself as the foremost of sinners, the chief of sinners. This is not just his talk. He is not saying this on the outside for show, so that he can appear more humble, while on the inside believing he isn't really that bad. His heart is truly on display here. He is putting forward his worst sins and saying that this is who he really was.

### 3. God's Mercy

Now look back at v. 13. Note the use of the word “formerly.” Paul didn't stay “a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.” He was a wicked opponent of Christ, but something happened to change his life course. Verse 13 explains what this was. He “received mercy.” From whom? From the greatest mercy giver in the universe. God took the initiative. God gave Paul a gift. God gave him mercy.

Why did God give Paul mercy, rather than the wrathful judgment that he deserved? Verse 13 says, “because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.” This seems like Paul is saying that he received mercy from God because he deserved it, because he didn't know any better. Could this be true?

Two factors lead us to the answer to this question. First, by definition, mercy is without merit. If you harm someone, you deserve punishment, not forgiveness. This is what is fair and just, right? Mercy is getting kindness and forgiveness when you don't deserve it. If Paul deserved lenient treatment from God for his sins, then God's leniency would be justice, not mercy.

The second factor that helps us see what Paul meant by “because” in this verse is seen as we follow the thought at the end of v. 13 into v. 14. The word “grace” is used. Just as with mercy, if Paul deserved grace from God, it would no longer be grace. So, by using the words “mercy” and “grace” we know that Paul is not saying he deserved mercy. That wouldn't make sense.

Then what does Paul mean when he says that he received mercy “because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief”? Similar language is used in Acts 3 when Peter is speaking to Jews about their role in the crucifixion of Jesus. Starting in v. 15 it says, “But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.” Then in v. 17 it says, “And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers.” Acts records that the Jews “killed the Author of life” and that they “acted in ignorance.” In this passage, did Peter mean that they were not blamable, not responsible for their great sin against the “Author of life”? The answer is found in v. 19, where Peter tells the Jews, “Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out.” Peter calls upon the Jews to repent. Why? It is because they had something to repent of. Just as their “ignorance” did not remove any portion of their blame for the sin of “killing the Author of life,” so in 1 Tim 1:13, Paul's ignorance did not remove any portion his blame for being a “blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.”

So, Paul is not saying that he deserved God's mercy. No one deserves God's mercy. Instead he is saying that God showed him mercy because he needed mercy. It is like a man saying that he received food because he was hungry. The meaning of “because” here is not that being hungry, he deserved food, but that he was given food because he needed

food, he was hungry. Likewise, Paul was ignorant of God and a great sinner in need of great mercy. He received just what he needed.

Look with me at v. 14. We see that when Paul “received mercy,” that the “grace of our Lord overflowed for” him “with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” The gift of God's mercy resulted in God's grace overflowing to Paul. God did not give him merely a trickle of grace, nor even just enough grace. God gave Paul an overflow of grace. It was super-abundant, more than enough, over the top, running over. Likewise for us, God does not hand out his grace with a tight fist for fear that it might run out. 2 Cor 9:8 says that “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.”

What form did God's grace take for Paul? God's grace overflowed with gifts of “faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” These gifts directly correspond to Paul's need. Verse 13 says that Paul was ignorant and unbelieving. He lacked faith. So, God's grace provided him with faith to believe God. Verse 13 also says that Paul was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent of Christ and his bride. God graciously gave him love for Christ and his church. The gifts of faith and love are what Paul needed to turn away from his sin and to turn toward God.

#### 4. Paul's Gratitude

We have seen so far that Paul had a strong sense of his own unworthiness because of his sins. And we have seen that he had a strong sense of God's overflowing grace because of God's mercy. Do these connect with what Paul says in v. 12? Look at that verse. “I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord.” He is thankful to Jesus, his master and ours. Why is he thankful? Paul answers in that same verse, “Because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service.” Paul is thankful because his Lord regarded him “faithful” and the result of that regard is seen in God's appointing Paul to serve him.

I'm not always thankful to God for all the service that he appoints me to. Are you? At times I grumble about the labor that God sets before me. Doing dishes, mowing grass, shoveling snow, training children, apologizing to my spouse, maintaining the car. These are all tasks that God clearly appoints for me as part of everyday life. But I would rather read a book, take a walk, go on a hike with my children, go on a date with my wife.

So, if it isn't just “natural” that we all are thankful for what God asks us to do, then why is Paul thankful? Maybe Paul is thankful in his service to God because God never asked him to do anything unpleasant, like mow the grass or shovel the snow. Let's see if that is true. Paul describes some of his everyday experiences as an apostle in 2 Cor 11:24-28.

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger

in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

So, what is the difference between Paul and me such that Paul can say that he is thankful to Christ Jesus for appointing him to this hard service and I have trouble being thankful for service like doing dishes and maintaining the car? I don't wish to be like I am. I want to be able to be like Paul. Don't you?

The key that reveals the difference between Paul's thankfulness and ours is in the word "though" in v. 13. Paul writes, "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" (1 Tim 1:12-13). By this word, Paul is making a comparison between God's calling him to serve and Paul's worthiness for that calling. Paul considers that he was not anywhere close to being worthy of God's judging him faithful and appointing him to his service. When he thinks of his horrific former rebellion and wickedness against his Lord, God's approval and appointment to ministry is like a gift of great value. And we can reason that it is of far greater value to him, than if he never thought of his unworthiness.

The fuel of Paul's thankfulness to God is his high appreciation of his former sinfulness and his high appreciation of God's mercy and gift of grace to him. To the degree that a man downplays his utter wickedness, his heart will downplay the value of God's mercy in forgiving that wickedness. To the degree that a person considers God's mercy to him to be a small gift, he will only thank God in a small way for judging him faithful to serve. The solution to a robust, grumble-stopping, thankfulness to God in the midst of difficult daily God-appointed work, is to believe with all your heart that you were a great sinner, completely out of range of deserving kindness from God. And then in spite of that, God gave you mercy and overflowed his grace upon you to have faith in him and to love him. Then with the Psalmist you can honestly say to God, "what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?" (Ps 8:4).

## 5. Paul's Experience Is for Everyone

Verse 15 says, "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." Three times in this letter, Paul says that a statement is trustworthy. Why would you preface what you wanted to say with, "The saying is trustworthy"? You would do it if you thought your hearer might struggle to believe what you are saying. You would say, "You can believe this. It is true!"

So, what is unbelievable about Paul's message that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost"? Can you recall a time when you have acted most shamefully, most contrary to all that you know a true lover of God to be? Think of a

time when you knew that you had sinned in a highly God-dishonoring way. Reflect on your heart as you came under the conviction of that as a sin. In that moment in your heart, were you lifting your head high in pride and self-esteem or looking only down at the ground in shame? At that time, you probably felt utterly unworthy of God's kindness. And you were.

For many people, in the moment when they are convinced that they are the foremost of sinners, they cannot imagine Christ Jesus coming into the world to save them. At that moment, the gospel message seems almost unbelievable to the soul. At that moment, Paul wants to say, "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."

In v. 12-14, Paul has been describing his own experience as a saved sinner. Then in v. 15, he relates that what God has done for him, God would do for all sinners. Having experienced the mercy and overflowing grace of God, Paul seems to almost trumpet this truth for the hearing of his own soul and for the hearing of the souls of others. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost!"

In v. 16, Paul recalls his receiving God's mercy. Right after thinking of his place as the foremost of sinners, he thinks of God's gift to him. "I am the foremost of sinners." And then v. 16, "But I received mercy..."

Jesus Christ had a purpose beyond Paul for granting Paul mercy for his sins. Verse 16 says that God planned that Paul serve as an example for the help of others "who were to believe in" Jesus Christ "for eternal life." How was this example to work? Paul highlights two facets. One is that Paul is the foremost of sinners. Just as he stated this in v. 15, he mentions it for a second time here in v. 16. "... that in me, as the foremost, ..." As we read this, we ought to think that perhaps if God granted mercy to Paul, a chief sinner, then he might grant mercy to me as well.

The second facet of this example is that "Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience" to Paul. Just as in v. 13 God's mercy took the form of overflowing grace, here that mercy takes the form of "perfect patience." How is the patience of Jesus Christ toward Paul, a mercy for him? Peter writes in 2 Pet 3:9, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." This verse seems to say that God will delay his coming judgment in order to give more time for people to repent.

Another place where the patience and the mercy of God are connected is when the Lord passed before Moses in Ex 34:6. "The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.'" Here God is saying that his nature is to be merciful and gracious and that part of that is that he is slow to anger. Being slow to anger is being patient when he has a right to be angry.

God's patience with sinners is not like the patience of a gardener waiting for his tomato plants to grow. Tomato plants commit no offense to the gardener when they take 100 days to yield ripe tomatoes. On the other hand, sinners, like you and me, deliberately provoke God when they refuse to treasure and obey him. Justice demands that their sin be swiftly and sufficiently punished. So, God is patient when he does not immediately execute his righteous judgment on sinners. In mercy he delays his judgment, giving abundant opportunity for repentance. In this way Jesus Christ displays his perfect patience to sinful men and women.

So then, the example to others “who were to believe in him for eternal life” is to function by holding together both the view of Paul as the foremost of sinners and Jesus Christ as the perfectly patient judge. There are three truths that this example can show other “foremost sinners,” like us, who might be hoping for salvation. First, Jesus Christ is slow to be provoked to execute his righteous judgment on our sin. Second, Jesus Christ does indeed grant mercy to those who have wickedly gone their own way. And third, Jesus Christ mercifully turns stone-cold hearts, hearts set against God, into soft, repentant, truth-seeking hearts that treasure God. In this he replaces unbelief with belief and he replaces wicked rebellion against God with love all by the gift of overflowing grace.

## 6. Paul's Response

This example of God's kindness to those of us who are foremost sinners reflects God's nature. As Paul considered God's overflowing grace, his head and heart came together in worship of this God. Look with me at v. 17, “To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.” Paul is responding to the glory of God. When we view the perfect patience of Jesus Christ in delaying his judgment so that people would come to repentance, we view the glory of God. When we view the mercy of God wiping away the penalty of sin, we view the glory of God. When we view the overflowing grace of God granting faith and love to previous haters of God and his church, we view the glory of God. These are all fruits of the saving work of Christ on the cross.

## 7. Conclusion

What is the meaning of Christmas? That Christ Jesus came into the world. Why did he come? To save sinners. It's true! That is a very merry Christmas. We are all foremost, chief, sinners. We are all in need of mercy from God so that he will overflow his grace, to turn us from unbelief in Jesus and a treasuring of sin, to belief that Jesus is the Christ and our highest treasure. As God does that for us, we will worship him alongside Paul saying, “To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”