

**Pentecost 17**  
**September 11, 2016**

*“Amazing Grace for the Worst of Sinners Like Me”*

**1 TIMOTHY 1:12-17**

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*I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

Have you ever met someone who likes to talk a lot about themselves? It seems that almost every other word is “I” and “me.” In the words we just read to you the Apostle Paul uses the words “I” and “me” over a dozen times. But he is not doing this to brag about himself. He is doing this to boast about the grace of God that had come into his life and rescued him when he was eternally lost.

Today we would have you do a little boasting about yourself, not the great things you have done in your life, but the great things your God has accomplished in your life by rescuing you when you were lost. What Paul says about his life, I can also say about my life, “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst.” As we just sang in the hymn: “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” Let’s take a closer look at this amazing grace for the worst of sinners. Let’s see how bad things once were and how good they are now.

**How bad things once were**

Before we look at how bad things once were in the life of Paul, it helps to realize that the Apostle Paul is writing this letter to a young pastor named Timothy. He is pleading with him to help the beautiful congregation in Ephesus not lose sight of the message of the gospel. It appears that false teachers were entering into the church who were introducing myths and Gnostic teachings to take them away from Jesus. To help Timothy show these people how much they needed Jesus, he points to how bad things once were in his life.

“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man.” To blaspheme means to say something evil against God or God’s people. That was certainly true of the Apostle Paul. There was a time in his life when he could not say enough bad about Jesus and the people who followed him. We used to sing song in Sunday School that had the refrain, “Oh, how I love Jesus, Oh, how I love Jesus, Oh, how I loved Jesus because he first loved me.” Paul’s song was different. His song was, “Oh,

how I hate Jesus....”

He recalls how bad his life was with the word “persecutor.” The Greek word for “persecute” has the thought of pursuing someone or chasing after them. He was not satisfied to chase after Christians in Jerusalem to have them put to death. He pursued them into other cities, brought them back to Jerusalem, and then had them put to death. And he was a violent man. He actually enjoyed hearing the sound of stones smashing the bodies of Christians who were stoned to death such as Stephen. He enjoyed hearing little children screaming “mommy” and “daddy” as he dragged their parents out of their homes to have them put into prison and even put to death.

He recalled how awful he was when he told his story in Acts 22: “I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison.” See the evil faces of the terrorists as they crashed the planes into the twin towers of the World Trade Center and into the Pentagon 15 years ago. See the evil face of the Apostle Paul as he enjoyed blaspheming Christians, persecuting them and seeing them die. It was this awful man that Jesus rescued and called to lead other people to saving faith in the only Savior and only hope for lost sinners.

Please note that Paul does not say, “I was the worst of sinners.” No he says in verse 15, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners- of whom I am the worst.” He says, “I am the worst” not past tense but present tense. How could he say, “I am the worst” even after he had become a Christian and given up persecuting Christians? Paul knew his own heart better than anyone else in the whole world, just as you know your own heart better than anyone else in the world. In Romans 7 Paul speaks very personally about his daily struggle with sin even after being led to faith in Christ Jesus. He makes this confession, “Indeed, I would not have known what sin was except through the law.” Then he goes on to confess that he did not realize what coveting was until he realized that even the desire to sin was already something totally unacceptable to God. Then he takes us deep into the inner recesses and dark dungeons of his own heart as he confesses, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is in my flesh. For I desire to do what is good but I cannot carry it out.”

Do you know that Federal Bureau of Investigation puts out a list of the worst fugitives from justice called “The FBI Ten Most Wanted Fugitives List?” J. Edgar Hoover started this in the early 1950’s. I remember seeing a picture of one of these guys in our local post office when I was a little child. The picture was scary. What if he made his way down the remote country road that led to our farm? Everything around us says these people are the worst sinners the world has ever known. They are the top ten. Everything inside my heart leads me to confess with Paul, “Jesus came into the world to save sinners- of whom I am the worst.”

Is it an exaggeration to say, “I the worst?” Is this some false hype or some unnecessary self-inflicting of wounds? Not when you measure yourselves up against God’s standards. Jesus did not say, “Do your best and hope in luck for all the rest.” He said, “Be perfect as God your heavenly Father is perfect.” Measured up against God’s standard I have to say in all honesty and truthfulness, “I am the worst.” I know my heart and you know yours. I don’t have to dig too deeply into my life to realize the word of God is true when it says in Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and beyond cure. Who can

understand it?"

To illustrate this: The other day I was shooting baskets with my grandson. He asked me if I ever played basketball. I told him I never played in high school or college but I enjoyed playing pickup games in the parks. What I didn't tell him was how careful I was to look for games that were at my level. If you get into the wrong game with lots of good players you will make a total fool of yourself.

The closer you get to Jesus as Paul did in his life, the more you realize every day you don't deserve to run with the big dogs. As you open doors into your own heart as Paul did, you find rooms that expose your true self. These rooms lead to more rooms that lead you to confess with the hymn writer, "Foul and full of sin I am, I am all unrighteousness" or as we sing in the hymn, "Chief of sinners though I be. Jesus shed his blood for me." "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-of whom I am the worst."

### **How good things are now**

As bad as things can be because of the sin that shows itself in our lives, we now focus on how good things are for us because of Jesus our Lord and Savior. Paul writes to Timothy, "I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief." Please don't misunderstand this verse. Paul is not saying that he was not guilty of what he did wrong because of ignorance and unbelief. If I go through a stop sign and receive a traffic ticket I cannot stand before a judge and saying, "I didn't see the sign." By speaking about his ignorance and unbelief, Paul glorifies the grace of God that came into his life. God's grace reaches into the hearts of people who want nothing to do with Jesus as their Savior. That is why God's grace is always so amazing. "I once was lost but now am found. Was blind but now I see."

Listen more to what Paul says, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." The Greek word that is used here for abundantly has a prefix that means all over or everywhere. Think of a car that hits a fire hydrant and the water shoots up into the air twenty feet and then flows everywhere.

Think of the blood of Jesus shed for you on the cross. There is cleansing in that blood, abundant cleansing for every sin that has ever been committed. "The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin." He removes our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west. He buries them in the depths of the sea. They are expunged from our record so that we look perfectly clean and pure in the eyes of our God. Such is this amazing grace that is very personal just for me.

I think of Mrs. Mendosa who was dying from pancreatic cancer. She lived next to our church. I visited her in the hospital. She was so happy to see me. The first words that came from her mouth were, "I am thinking of the blood of Jesus pouring down from the cross and paying for all my sins." People such as Mrs. Mendosa, or the Apostle Paul, or John Newton, confess their faith to us so we realize that there is a place also for us beneath the cross of Jesus. We sing these wonderful hymns to each other to help us

realize personally and confess personally, "Jesus came for me."

Paul knew the Lord had a plan for him in his life. He knew that he had special opportunities to speak to people about the story of his life and how he was rescued that day when Jesus appeared to him personally on the road to Damascus. "But for this very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as example for those who would believe in him. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever."

All these wonderful accounts here in the Bible are given to us to help us realize there is room beneath the cross for sinners even the worst of sinners like me. I know my heart and you know yours. Jesus tells the story of a shepherd who leaves the ninety nine to seek the one lost sheep. We hear this story and say, "That's me. That's me." Jesus stops, looks up to Zacchaeus and says "Zacchaeus, come down immediately, I must stay at your house today." We hear this and say, "That's me. That's me." We hear Paul tell Timothy, "Christ Jesus came into the world to say sinners- of whom I am the worst." And we say, "That's me. That's me. That's the story of my life." Amen.