

9/3/23 - 1 Tim. 1:12-17 - "Wretched Christians"

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[0 : 00] Please turn to 1 Timothy 1, 12-17. I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, pointing me to his service.

Though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and unsolent 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. But I receive mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ must display his perfect patience as an example to those who are to believe in him for eternal life.

To the king of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. Amen. This is God's word. Well, the singing was absolutely phenomenal this morning.

Amen to that. It is such a blessing. These can be songs that you've heard over and over and over, but to hear the vibrancy of voices surrounding you and truths of God, there's nothing like it.

[1 : 31] There's nothing like it. Today we continue in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and we have to remember that this letter is unique due to the dynamic nature of this letter.

It's personal, but it's also pastoral, and it can be looked at as general. It's personal because it's between Paul and Timothy, close companions and co-laborers in the gospel.

It's pastoral between a church planter and a church, but also general to be transcendent through all time. Paul's whole reasoning for writing this letter is found in chapter 3, verse 14, where it says, I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God.

That's the purpose statement of this letter and a rooting statement for that. And so he says, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth or pillar and support of the truth.

And so for that, we continue in his address to the church in Ephesus. Still early in his letter at this point, we're still in chapter 1, and you can imagine he's still developing this flow of thought, but we had to put pause, push pause on the flow of thought last week because we ran out of time.

[3 : 00] But last week, if you can remember, maybe you weren't here and you were traveling or maybe you were joined on the live stream, we have to remember that Paul didn't waste much time in his letter. He basically had two verses of, hey, Timothy, what's up?

Here's a problem. And he didn't waste time with formalities. He jumped right into it, hopped right into it because there was a problem in Ephesus, in the church in Ephesus, that the gospel was being distorted.

And Paul sends Timothy literally into the wolf pen to deal with it, to actually, by his own words, to shut them up. How about that?

And these certain persons in this church were rising up. They were embellishing the Word of God. They were adding to it and exaggerating portions of it.

They were misusing the law of God to attribute somehow to the goodness of themselves. I don't know how you do that, but that's an error. All of it is an error in a blatant error and disregard for abiding in Jesus Christ's Word and keeping His commandments.

[4 : 12] A blatant error. And Paul combats the goodness of man as these certain persons were rising up, how they were using the law to somehow prove that they were good.

And he uses himself as a substitute, as a tribute, if there's anybody who knows the reference. He stands up and offers himself as a tribute, puts himself on the chopping block to drive home the point that's within the heart of his opponents that think that there is anything good in man.

He puts himself on the chopping block. Now, it's very common in our day in evangelical Christianity where preachers will circumvent the talk of sin or any issue of sin and promote messages that are very boosting in self-esteem and boast in self-worth that don't say that about yourself, declare what's good and just make your declarations.

Well, today's passage will not only differ from that message, whatever that is, but also help us to realize that the gospel is for believers as well as unbelievers.

The gospel is for you and me today that we have to uphold. We must remember who we were if we're to reinforce in our lives of who God desires us to become.

[5 : 42] And so, let's pray as we dive into this section in 1 Timothy. And I'd like to title this sermon Wretched Christians.

And I know I just got an amen from heaven from Jonathan Edwards, famous for sinners in the hands of an angry God, if you're not familiar with that reference.

Wretched Christians. I'm going to have three sections, but one main point. Let's pray. Father, thank you for your word this morning.

Thank you for allowing us to hear from you and through a means of there not being an issue of subjectivity, but there's all the basis of objectivity.

If your word says it, it's true. And so, as we till the soil in our hearts, we desire to see truth and hear truth today. Help me, as your servant, your under-shepherd, to speak truth to your fold today.

[6 : 50] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So, the first section, we see that our weakness is met with God's strength.

Our weakness is met with God's strength. We see that in verse 12. Paul says, I thank Him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because He judged me faithful, appointing me to His service.

Now, Paul, still in his thought in chapter 1, he continues his thoughts from last week, expressing his thankfulness to Jesus Christ, specifically, forgiving Paul's strength.

What's the object, though, of his thankfulness? Well, look, it's right there for you. It is God's judgment and His conversion appointing Him to service.

It might be odd for you to think of Paul at this season in his life to be thankful for much of anything. He's been in prison for the last four of five years.

[8 : 05] Two years in Caesarea, he was out for a year, and then another two years in Rome. But he says, I'm thankful.

There must be something vital to qualify Paul's thankfulness in this culturally tense season, isn't there? while there might be a number of privileges that you could probably go through the laundry list of things that are good about being a Christian in the life of a Christian, but Paul hits two vital qualifiers of his thankfulness, that God calls and God commissions.

Verse 12, He calls, He gave him strength. Jesus Christ came to Paul mid-trip onto Damascus to slaughter some more Christians, to take them from their families and throw them into prison.

He intervened in Paul's path of destruction and Paul's wretchedness and strengthened him at that time. To be strengthened, it means just similarly to being made, making him able.

There was an intervention of God at this point. God empowered him at this point. But not only that, the second part is that He commissions Paul, that God judged him faithful, that God, the holy God of the universe, perfect and blameless, supremely holy, came and looked upon Paul and counted Paul worthy, putting him in the service.

[9 : 48] Now, considering this time in Paul's life of going from one prison to the next and the condition of his faith, it seems like he's doing all right considering, well, we find the center core of Christian contentment.

In other words, his joy overflows from his lips, not because of his health, of his wealth, of his possessions, Paul's thankfulness is tapped into the well of God's merciful intervention in his life.

how many of us need to be reminded or maybe reinforced of the same theological points in the midst of wherever God has you in?

I know many seasons that we're in right now as a church individually within your families and, boy, between family crises of family members just struggling with adhering to their God-given identities and gender from people being in and out of rehab facilities, families, you might be in a season of abuse where you're trying to get out of a bad situation, get away from someone who is dangerous, or maybe just instability, whether it's finances or career focus.

How many of us need reminded or maybe reinforced of this theological points in the midst of where we are today? God's merciful intervention church is the meditation of a Christian heart that simply says life is not okay, but everything will be okay.

[11 : 55] Why? Because we are content in our salvation regardless of where our life is right now. God's commission proceeds His call to us and if His call then His merciful intervention.

Not even Satan can touch that church nor can your situation. Here we find thankfulness to God in all things specifically in His intervention and salvation.

But we also see something developing as well in the second section that our wretchedness is met with God's mercy. Our wretchedness is met with God's mercy.

Verse 13 he says formerly though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, an insolent opponent, but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief and the grace of God, grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Now, unless you were fortunate to be raised in a healthy Christian home, which was God's desire for all of us, but unfortunately that's not all of our stories.

[13 : 15] Or if you were maybe in a story of going from darkness into light, Paul takes a blast to his past, which was not being raised in a Christian home, but it was a day marked from darkness to light.

Here, Paul's past, we find a weak and broken man in which he describes his wretchedness in three simple words, persecutor, blasphemer, and insolent opponent.

He wanted nothing to do with Jesus Christ. I won't have you turn to the verses, but I'll summarize them there. All you have to do is get a good glimpse of who Paul used to be and read Acts 7 to Acts 9.

That will give you a good taste of what he used to be. Paul was formerly known as Saul, and he was present standing there watching the death of the disciple Stephen be stoned to death, a gruesome, bloody death in Acts 7.

Paul was there. Paul was the godfather of bands of men persecuting the church, breaking into homes, ripping children from their mothers, mothers from their husbands, throwing them into prison.

[14 : 42] Paul was there. Paul breathed threats and murder against Christians in Acts chapter 9. Paul was there.

You see, Paul was the epitome of evil. Greater evil than all of our evil deeds combined. I don't know if anybody here is convicted of slaughtering Christians, at least not to my knowledge.

He was very evil. If you could imagine the thoughts that sometimes keep us up at night, I think Paul would trump our thoughts. to hear and see what he saw and have that replay in nightmares in his head, to hear the screams of the children that he ripped away from families.

I mean, do you guys not sense the realness of who Paul used to be? The two words make all the difference. Formerly.

And the word but. It says, though formerly I was a blasphemer, I was a persecutor, insolent opponent, but I received mercy.

[16 : 02] When Jesus Christ stopped Paul on his road to get some more Christians, he didn't deserve anything but death on that road to Damascus.

But instead of receiving death, he received mercy. Paul was instantly forgiven by his faith.

Why did Paul go on like this for killing and rampaging Christians? Why? Why? Well, he says that he acted ignorantly or he hated Jesus Christ because he didn't know Jesus Christ.

And the same was true for all of those surrounding the cross of Jesus Christ who tore his flesh, who whipped him in a vile attempt to take his life before he even was hung on the cross.

As Jesus said, forgive them for they know not what they do. They are acting ignorantly. Church, the depravity of man is so deeply ignorant to Jesus Christ that the only way to know Jesus Christ is for Jesus Christ to intervene upon the road of your life.

[17 : 39] Our road in life is headed for destruction unless we're taken off of that road. God doesn't send people to hell.

People are already going there to Damascus to murder more Christians. Wretchedness. the only way to know Jesus Christ is for God to intervene.

And now many attribute it to their decision that they made to follow Jesus Christ. But that simply isn't biblical because God intervenes.

God strengthens. And God's strengthening occurs long before we ever make a choice that we realize that we are following Jesus. You see, it is through God's intervention alone in our wretched estate that we receive mercy.

It's undeserving. It's miraculous. But guess what? It is sure when God acts. And we then know that we can't earn our way to heaven, but we sure can fall for a lie that sends us to hell.

[18 : 57] My son, maybe both my sons, love Pilgrim's Progress, but my six-year-old is long asleep before I get to the end of the chapter. But my oldest is very intrigued with the story.

And John Bunyan highlights this experience with mercy and Pilgrim's Progress as he wrote, though I was such a great sinner before conversion, yet God never much charged the guilt of my sins, of my ignorance upon me.

Only he showed me I was lost if I had not Christ because I had been a sinner. A sinner makes a sinner by one thing.

You don't have Jesus Christ. And Pilgrim's Progress is certainly a true illustration of that. In verse 14, for Paul, not only was his thankfulness and strengthening from God's intervention, but the object of mercy and abundant grace, you see that in verse 14, originates from Jesus Christ alone, where a Christian receives then faith, receives love.

Isn't this the most beautiful picture of the gospel this morning? that a Christian finds themselves wrapped in the arms of God, one arm being mercy and grace, and the other arm receiving his love and faith.

[20 : 36] This is such a great picture of the gospel. Every spiritual blessing comes from Jesus Christ, even our faith. Maybe you're an unbeliever today, and I would encourage you not to turn from that love and that faith today, because as the false teachers, we see it is very possible to forget some important things as chapter 1, verse 5 through 6 specifically articulates.

But this is the true gospel. There's no gray area of this black and white issue. Receiving the gospel is often portrayed in many ways, often bad, some good, but when have we thought that we can run into Jesus without God doing something in our hearts first?

that it's like the picture of Paul in his conversion and his argument all through Romans is that as sinners, as wretched sinners apart from Jesus Christ, our hand is clenched tightly, almost to make our palms bleed in our wretchedness.

We will not receive anything from God, God. But until God pries open our fingers and says, mercy and grace, there we receive his love and faith.

Isn't this just a wonderful depiction of what happened in Paul's life and what is his argument in Romans? God's God holding your wrist very firmly and saying, receive my mercy and grace.

[22 : 35] How do you know? Well, you often know it by the realization that it seems too good to be true. That's usually how you know.

it's too good to be true that you feel the weight of God's love and mercy being greater than any sins in your life that weighed you down.

If that's you, come. God is doing a work in you and he is strengthening you today. Paul says, it's so clear, the saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance in verse 15, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the foremost.

The family of God is full of formerly wretched sinners whom God intervenes, transferred citizenship. God did it.

He did the paperwork. He filed it in the courts. not I, but Christ. That's the good news of the gospel. And we see it doesn't stop there in section 3 in verse 16 and 17.

[23 : 54] He says, but I received mercy, once again he says, for this reason, that in me, just a reminder, as I, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

Previously in this passage, as Paul is concluding his thoughts here, we see that he was going from his past to his present and almost now to his future, but keeping in view his past.

He says, but I receive mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, like, do not forget who you used to be, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

Isn't it funny how often life happens and we can look back upon our conversion story, whether that's a story of, like, no real stupendous, like, darkness to light moment.

You just were raised in a wonderful Christian home and you just continued in that way, and one day were baptized. Man, I wish all of our stories could have been like that. It doesn't matter, though, your conversion story, whether it's a Christian home or like Paul's, because we often go through life, same life, same experiences, and life happens and we think, you know what, what's the point?

[25 : 32] What's the point in this? My struggles have increased. My job is actually at stake because they're telling me to take that cross down from my cubicle wall because they don't do religion here.

My friend group has decreased. I used to be kind of well-known. Now everybody thinks I'm a religious loser or maybe a religious self-righteous punk, as usually is the perceived title for all Christians, that we have it all together.

The church has unfortunately lost its status of being a hospital of broken people, hasn't it? Or maybe sometimes you're just asking, what's the point?

Because the church has far more problems going on than the local bar you used to frequent. Or the fact that persecution is prevalent all over the world.

I don't know what happens in life to make you ask, what's the point? But here's some of them. We will ask, what's the point? You might ask that today, wherever you're at.

[26 : 41] But if verse 15 stands true, Jesus Christ didn't just come to save sinners in general. His blanket of grace wasn't just over.

All these people who did their prayer and received Jesus as some crusade or whatever it was. It wasn't some blankets of mercy.

It was individual. That God didn't just save sinners in general, He saved you. Saved you. Specific.

The gospel is a specific act of taking the worst of sinners and transforming them daily. And look at that present tense and future tense.

See, this is why I'm arguing for you today. Our need for the gospel wasn't just to become converted. We need the gospel every single day, even as Christians.

[27 : 46] For those of us that question, what's the point? Well, we remember that our present need for the gospel is our propelling and future propelling efforts of our devotion and displaying the gospel to an unbelieving world who ought to remember that God is a forbearing God to all those around.

And we can say, let me show you a slideshow of what I used to be and how God has intervened. And in our lives, we say, I don't deserve it, but God.

I am the worst, but God. I am the foremost of sinners, but God. God. The only qualification for God's mercy is the sin of which we cling and surrender to Him.

Think, Christianity is the only religion in the world today that is for bad people. All these religions say that you can become good enough.

Christianity is the only one where we put our lives on the chopping block and say, I'm not good enough. And that is our qualification. Our lives are given purpose, not by our declarations over ourselves of self-worth or self-boasting, but by His declaration over us as forgiven.

[29 : 17] Church, the answer to your so what is found in the example, in the displaying that you serve to the world who's watching you. Who sees the grace in your lives, that inquires.

Think, of all the means that God could have orchestrated salvation, think about that. He chose the message of this gospel to be proclaimed by you and by me.

He could have done a plethora of better ways than using me God. Trust me, I know. I meet that reality every time I look in the mirror of feeling unqualified to the task.

He chose the message of the gospel to be proclaimed and carried by His people. And God, being forbearing against sin, is giving a sinful world time to repent.

I've got to argue with you today, what time are we giving to this? If God's giving the world time to repent, what time are we giving to that?

[30 : 38] For many of us, we're at a point where there's only one thing that we can do is to believe. one thing to do than just to believe that Jesus Christ is Savior.

He intervenes upon our behalf. But it's important to know if you're in that place today that it's not good enough just to believe that you're a sinner.

That's half the battle there. It's not good enough to realize that you're a sinner. But unless you receive Jesus Christ as your Savior, that makes all the difference.

So, for many of us, we must be strengthened, we must be thankful for this gospel, we must be saved daily, renewed in the message of the gospel in our lives, remembering who we were to reinforce who God is desiring for us to become.

For who, though? Verse 17, to the king of the ages, this, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.

[31 : 54] Amen. Amen. Amid the quietness of an unbelieving heart is a cry to no truth, and I pray that we carry that truth to an unbelieving world.

But also, amid the quietness of a believing heart, we are reminded of John Newton's famous chorus, Amazing Grace. It says, Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now I'm found. Was blind, but now I see. Why is grace so amazing?

Because I am the worst of sinners. You are the worst of sinners. We are wretched Christians. For our hearts to dismiss our wretchedness and disregard sinfulness, we cannot forget the vital truth of the mercy of God in our lives.

We can't dismiss it. We must embrace that we are wretched Christians, and for that, it drives us even closer to the grace and in the embrace of God where His mercy and grace and love and faith wrap us tightly in an embrace that we'll never let go.

[33 : 23] Let's pray.