



Believers are to use our spiritual gifts to serve one another in the strength that God supplies, so that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 4:10-11). I'm thankful for the ways that so many of our members glorify God by serving in various capacities. Sometimes circumstances beckon us to go above and beyond our regular ministry. Such was the case last week when we needed to have our carpets cleaned in the sanctuary, lobby, and nursery. A lot of furniture and equipment had to be moved to clear these areas for cleaning, and you stepped up big time. Many of you also assisted with the set-up and break-down of the Harvest Fellowship this past Wednesday. Others helped to put all the furniture and equipment back in place once the carpet cleaning was done. So, thank you for serving our Lord and his church.

Incidentally, today's passage in 1 Timothy begins on a note of thanks. Midway through chapter one, the apostle Paul thanks God for the privilege of serving him. This expression of gratitude flows into a broader testimony of God's grace in Paul's life. Paul's testimony is recorded in verses 12-17 and is one of the most encouraging texts in the New Testament, especially for those who are haunted by their failures, who feel the weight of their sins and think they're beyond the reach of God's mercy and grace. Paul writes,

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

The full Hunter's Moon peaked last evening and glowed brightly in the night sky. Did you see it? I had a hard time taking my eyes off it because it was so beautiful. The moon has no glow of its own but reflects the light of the sun. In the same way, Paul's testimony reflects the light of God's Son, Jesus Christ. The light of the gospel shines all the more brilliantly against the darkness of the different doctrine that was being espoused in Ephesus. Paul told Timothy to guard the gospel by confronting false teachers head on.

Not only is Paul committed to guarding the gospel but he gets excited about the gospel! It had radically changed his life. It had brought him into a right relationship with the Lord. And, best of all, Paul knew that what the Lord Jesus did for him he would do for anyone who would "believe in him for eternal life."

What a key reminder this is for Christians! One of the many things I love about our church is our commitment to proclaiming the gospel and not tampering with Scripture. But did you know it's possible to be dead-on doctrinally yet dried up spiritually? That's eventually what happened to the church at Ephesus. A few decades after Paul wrote this letter to Timothy, the Lord Jesus delivered another message to this church through the pen of the apostle John. It is recorded in the first seven verses of Revelation 2. By then the church had developed a zero tolerance for false teaching, which is a good thing. But despite their zeal for the truth, they had lost their first love – their love for the Lord and thus their love for one another – which is always bad thing, and which is why they incurred the Lord's rebuke. Jesus told them, "Remember then how far you have fallen; repent and do the works you did at first. Otherwise, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" (Rev. 2:5 NLT).

How does a church remain loyal to God's word without letting their love diminish? They do it by celebrating the gospel, as Paul does in 1 Timothy 1:12-17. Paul's own testimony and personal example provide the key to being doctrinally healthy and spiritually happy.

**As we guard the gospel,
let us *celebrate* the gospel.**

For the next several moments I want you to see how Paul celebrates the good news of God's saving grace, first in his own life and then what this means for every other sinner. The sequence of Paul's testimony can be summed up in four words: Gratitude, grace, gospel, and glory. Let's consider each of these elements briefly.

**Gratitude
(v. 12)**

Paul begins his testimony by saying, "I thank him who has given me strength, Jesus Christ our Lord..." (v. 12). Paul began his letter to Timothy by bestowing on him a triple prayer-wish: "Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord."

Paul wasn't speaking out of school. He knows how well fortified a gospel minister must be to remain faithful in the Lord's work. And not just apostles and pastors, but all God's people. Jesus told his disciples, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5) – nothing of eternal significance, that is. Anybody can produce wood, hay and stubble, but only those who serve in the strength that God supplies can accomplish great things for God. In another letter Paul wrote, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

Do you thank the Lord who has given you strength – strength to live, love, and serve him? Don't miss the significance of his name and title. He is "Christ Jesus our Lord." *Christ* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew term Messiah, which means "anointed one." Jesus is the one whom God anointed to be the Savior of the world. The name *Jesus* means, "the Lord saves." Paul refers to him as "our Lord." The fullness of this title, "Jesus Christ our Lord," may express Paul's continued reflection on his conversion, because prior to that, Paul had denied Jesus' deity, his Lordship, and his power to save.

But this was the one whom strengthened Paul, who says, “he judged me faithful.” This doesn’t mean that Christ saw in Paul something that was inherently trustworthy. Rather, Paul’s suitability for ministry and faithfulness in ministry was due to the inner strength that God mercifully promised and provided apart from any inherent goodness in Paul. He says so explicitly in 1 Corinthians 7:25, where he refers to himself as “one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy.” Consider for a moment those two statements:

1 Tim. 1: 12: “because he judged me faithful”

1 Cor. 7:25: “one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy”

Taken together, these two clauses communicate something extremely important about Paul and every Christian, every servant of Christ. It is not that Paul was inherently trustworthy or had a proven track record of faithfulness when he was converted. In Acts 9, the Lord said to Ananias at the time of Paul’s conversion, “he is a chosen instrument of mine” (Acts 9:15). God in his mercy decided to make Paul worthy of trust and therefore one who would be faithful.¹

How did God demonstrate this? Paul tells us at the end of verse 12: “by appointing me to his service.” The Greek word for “service” is *diakonia*, from which we get our English word “deacon.” There are many expressions of Christian service. Matt Smethurst points out, “If you’ve put your trust in Christ, you are already a deacon in a broad sense.”² If you are a believer, you too are a chosen instrument of the Lord, who has mercifully called you into his service.

As I think about this amazing reality, my mind goes to Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 4:1, where he wrote, “Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.”

Fellow Christian, when is the last time that you regarded your ministry as a mercy? At times we get tired of serving and lose heart because we forget that our ministry is a mercy. We begin thinking of our ministry as something we *have* to do instead of a service that we get to do. When our service to the Lord becomes more of a duty than a delight, then it’s a sure sign that we have ceased to celebrate the gospel and are attempting to serve the Lord in our own strength. Yet Scripture says, “the joy of the Lord is [our] strength.” The key to recovering your joy is not to beat yourself up for having a bad attitude but to get your eyes back on Christ and remember what he’s done for you. “Christian believers are those who walk in the footsteps of the ultimate deacon, the suffering servant who came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). As a ransom for you. Precious believer, you’ve been mercifully ransomed by Christ who judged you faithful, appointing you to his service. How amazing is that! No wonder Paul exclaimed, “I thank him who has given me strength, Jesus Christ our Lord!” May we give him thanks as well. We will as we celebrate the gospel.

The grace of God is the fountain from which this gratitude springs.

¹ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, eds. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992, paperback edition, 2003) 94.

² Matt Smethurst, *Deacons: How They Serve and Strengthen the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 16.

Grace (vv. 13-14)

God's grace is highlighted by Paul in verses 13-14 as he emphasizes *what he was* and *what he received*.

What he was (v. 13a)

"Though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent" (v. 13a). Paul is not exaggerating his pre-conversion state. Luke the historian tells us at the beginning of Acts 9 that Paul (formerly called Saul) was literally "breathing in threats and murders against the disciples of the Lord." Threats and murder had become the very air that Paul breathed, like a snorting warhorse charging into battle.

Years later when Paul shared his testimony with King Agrippa, Paul freely confessed,

"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities."

- Paul the Apostle
Acts 26:9-11

So, not only did Paul oppose and blaspheme the name of Jesus, but Paul "tried to make [Jesus' disciples] blaspheme" by chasing them down in foreign cities and persecuting them to the point of death. It's hard to imagine that someone could be more zealous in opposing Jesus Christ. Paul says, "I was ... [an] insolent opponent." The Greek term is *hubristés* (hoo-bris-tace') from which we get our English word "hubris," and it depicts a person who is insolent and arrogant and finds pleasure in insulting and humiliating other people. Paul's blasphemous words and violent acts, like lava from an erupting volcano, spewed forth from a hostile, hate-filled heart.

That's the man he was. But look at what he received.

What he received (v. 13b)

"But I received mercy..." (v. 13b). Humanly speaking, there was no hope for someone as maliciously opposed to Christ as Paul. But he received mercy. Why? Paul tells us: "Because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief." Matthew Henry wrote, "Unbelief is at the bottom of what sinners do ignorantly; they do not believe God's threatenings; otherwise they could not do as they do."

Paul in his unregenerate state did what every sinner does: act ignorantly in unbelief. Jesus prayed from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul states, "None of the rulers of this age knew [God's] wisdom, because if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (vv. 7-8 CSB). In Titus 3, the passage we read earlier in our worship service, Paul

tells his fellow believers to “show perfect courtesy toward all people. For we ourselves were once foolish and disobedient [and] misled” (Titus 3:3).

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, *but because of his mercy*.

- Titus 3:4-5

Likewise, in Ephesians 2, Paul says that we were dead in our transgressions and sins, gratifying the cravings of our flesh, following the ways of this world, and by our very nature were subject to God’s wrath, like everyone else.

But God, being *rich in mercy*, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by *grace* you have been saved....

- Ephesians 2:4-5

That’s the grace by which Paul was saved and the grace that he celebrates in verse 14, saying, “And the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

An artist once submitted a painting of Niagara Falls to an exhibition but forgot to give it a title. So, the gallery dubbed it, “More to Follow.” More than 1.5 million gallons of water pour over Niagara Falls per second. This natural phenomenon vividly illustrates the floods of God’s grace. There’s always *more to follow*, or as James put it in his epistle, “he gives more grace” (James 4:6a).

Psalms 65 says that when the river overflows, crops abound. Likewise, when God’s grace floods a heart, “faith and love” spring up (1 Tim. 1:14b). God graciously replaced Paul’s unbelief with “faith” and his hatred with “love.” God made his enemy his friend. “Faith and love” are found in “Christ Jesus” who came into this world to save sinners. That’s the glorious truth that Paul highlights in the next verse.

Gospel (v. 15)

“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” (1 Tim. 1:15). Notice how Paul introduces this good news. It is *not* like the myths and speculations of the false teachers (v. 4) but is true. It is God’s revelation to us and is therefore “trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance.”³

What is the saying? “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” This may have been an early Christian slogan. It makes for a better bumper sticker than “Got Jesus?”

What great news this is: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” Question: Whom did Christ Jesus come into the world to save? *Sinners!* As long as you fall under

³ This is the first of five “trustworthy sayings” in the pastoral epistles. The other four sayings are recorded in 1 Timothy 3:1; 4:9; 2 Timothy 2:11; Titus 3:8.

that general description, God's salvation is for you. We've all sinned, but we all don't sin in the same way. We've all wandered away from God, yet each person in his own way. But regardless of where you are or how you got there, this is good news for you: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Jesus himself testified, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32).

⇒ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He mixed with sinners. He ate with sinners. He lived with sinners. He died with sinners. He made his grave with the wicked. He entered into paradise with a thief. And now in heaven he rejoices with redeemed sinners.

"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." He did not come to *condemn* sinners (John 3:17). He did not come into the world to *help sinners save themselves*, in whole or in part. The only thing we contribute to our salvation is the sin for which Christ came to save us. And Christ did not come to *leave us content in our sin*. He came to save us from the *punishment* of our sin, from the *pollution* of our sin (he gives us a "pure heart," v. 5). And he saves us from the *power* of sin, so we might walk in the light as he is in the light (1 John 1:7).

"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he pre-existed eternally as the Second Person in the Trinity. But he "came into the world." He did so voluntarily out of love for his Father and for us. He came to save sinners. That was his mission. As the one who is truly God and truly Man, he is able to save sinners. He is able to sympathize with us as a man, and he is able to save us since he is God!

Furthermore, Paul emphasizes that Jesus came to save not just sinners in general. He came to save me personally! "Of whom I am the foremost." Paul doesn't say "I was the foremost sinner," but "I *am* the foremost." The comments on this verse by the late evangelist and Bible teacher John Stott are worth quoting at length here. Stott writes,

Common sense tells us not to take [Paul's] statement as a precise, scientific fact. For he had not investigated the sinful and criminal records of all the inhabitants of the world, carefully compared himself with them, and concluded that he was worst of all. The truth is that when we are convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit, an immediate result is that we give up all such comparisons. Paul was so vividly aware of his own sins that he could not conceive that anybody could be worse. It is the language of every sinner whose conscience has been awakened and disturbed by the Holy Spirit. We may begin like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable [in Luke 18, who said], "God, I thank you that I am not like other men," but we end like the tax collector who beat his breast and said (literally), "God have mercy on me, *the* sinner."⁴ The Pharisee indulged in odious comparisons; as far as the tax collector was concerned, however, there were no other sinners with whom to compare himself; he was the one and only.⁵

⁴ Luke 18:9ff.

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*, The Bible Speaks Today, NT series editor John R. W. Stott (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 53.

I wonder if you've ever seen yourself in this way. Only a heart flooded with God's grace can say, "I am the foremost sinner," and mean it.⁶

The good news is that Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners – even the very worst of them. One of God's purposes in saving Paul was to press home this very point. In verse 16, Paul says, "But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost [sinner], Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life." This means that no human on earth is beyond the reach of God's grace – *grace that is greater than our sin*.

- ⇒ There was a time when my dad rejected Christ. He was a military man – a Marine – who literally blew smoke in his brothers' faces and said, "I don't want to hear it" when they tried sharing the gospel with him.
- ⇒ But the Lord had mercy on my dad who overheard a gospel message by Billy Graham that his sister-in-law was listening to in the other room. In that moment my dad became convicted of his sin and convinced that Jesus had come to save him.
- ⇒ Now this morning, about a thousand miles away, at a small church in Mississippi, my 86-year-old father is on the platform playing his guitar and singing a duet with his pastor's wife before the congregation the beautiful hymn that bears that title.

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!
Yonder on Calvary's mount out-poured –
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.

Sin and despair, like the sea-waves cold,
Threaten the soul with infinite loss;
Grace that is greater– yes, grace untold–
Points to the Refuge, the mighty Cross.

Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace,
Freely bestowed on all who believe!
All who are longing to see His face,
Will you this moment His grace receive?

*Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin!*

This grace is freely bestowed on all who believe. That's what Paul iterates in 1 Timothy 1:16. It is not enough to believe you are a sinner. You must also take Christ as your Savior. "Salvation belongs to the Lord" (Psalm 3:8; Jonah 2:9). You must "believe in him for eternal life." *Will you this moment his grace receive?* Everyone who truly receives the grace of God will joyfully ascribe glory to God. And that's what Paul does in verse 17.

⁶ In one of his earlier epistles, Paul says, "I am the least of the apostles" (1 Cor. 15:9). In a later epistle, he writes, "God gave his grace to me, the least of all God's people" (Eph. 3:8 CEB). Still later, Paul says here in 1 Timothy 1:15, "I am the worst sinner of all" (paraphrased).

Glory (v. 17)

“To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” (1 Tim. 1:17). On this closing note of praise, Paul uses transcendent language to honor the God who works in personal, immanent ways. First Timothy 1:17 forms the basis of the first stanza to the well-known hymn by Walter Charles Smith:

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise!

Let's consider briefly each of the divine traits that Paul delineates in this verse.

King of the Ages: God sovereignly governs all the ages – before creation, after creation, the final age and right on into and throughout eternity. What encouragement this brings us in our topsy-turvy world!

Immortal: “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of all the earth. He never grows weak or weary” (Isaiah 40:28 CSB, NLT). God is not subject to deterioration or destruction. He is beyond the ravages of decay and death. He is immortal!

Invisible: The apostle John concludes the prologue of his Gospel by saying, “No one has ever seen God. The one and only Son, who is himself God and is at the Father’s side — he has revealed him” (John 1:18). Likewise, Paul declares in Colossians 1:15, “He “is the image of the invisible God.”

The only God: *mono theo*. “I am the Lord and there is no other” says the Almighty in Isaiah 45:18. To “the only God” and to him alone . . .

Be honor and glory forever and ever: Paul began by saying, “I thank God,” and he ends by saying, “To ... the only God be honor and glory forever and ever.” It’s easy for personal testimonies to become self-centered and more about what we do for God than about what God has done for us. But Paul begins and ends with God – and keep Christ at the center. For at the heart of his testimony is the truth, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

That’s why God deserves all the “glory forever and ever.” Paul punctuates his testimony with the word “Amen.” It “is not an afterthought; it is a word of agreement and affirmation.”⁷ It means “truly” or “so be it.” The word *amen* “invites a personal response. When Timothy first read this letter aloud to the church at Ephesus, he undoubtedly paused when he came to the end of this verse, so that all the people could say, ‘Amen.’”⁸

⁷ Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, Reformed Expository Commentary, New Testament edited by Daniel M. Doriani, series editors Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 42.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 43. Ryken goes on to say, “Down through the centuries many other Christians have added their own “Amen” to Paul’s doxology. In his ‘Personal Narrative,’ Jonathan Edwards records his life-changing experience of reading 1 Timothy 1:17 as a young man: ‘The first instance that I remember of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things that I have much lived in since, was on reading the words, “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever

I wonder if you can say that from your heart. To agree with Paul and the word of God, you must **trust** Jesus to be your Savior and King, and you must **testify** of your faith in him. as Paul did. We do this initially through the ordinance of baptism. That's when we go public with our faith in the manner that Jesus prescribed. Have you obeyed the Lord in this matter? "Believe and be baptized." Trust and testify. That is God's will for you. C.S. Lewis wrote, "we delight to praise what we enjoy because *the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment.*"⁹ We know what this feels like when we read a good book, watch a good movie, or see the Patriots beat the Bills. We can't help but celebrate what we enjoy – and praise is the expression and consummation of that joy.

When working with baptismal candidates, we stress the importance of their testimonies. In fact, we have a testimony worksheet that helps them to summarize the gospel and God's work of grace in their lives. If you would like testimony worksheet for the sake of going public with your faith through baptism or through your ongoing witness to others, you can grab a copy at our welcome center. I've placed several copies there for you.

What an encouraging text this is for Christians! One pastor writes,

Individual believers, local churches, and the church of Jesus Christ across the globe will continue to go through difficult times; however, the Head of the church, Christ, our God, Savior, and King, will ever be on his throne. Though opposition and challenges may come, God is the King of the ages, and He will lead, guide, protect, purify, sanctify, and preserve his church.¹⁰

"To him be honor and glory forever and ever." And all God's people said . . . *Amen!*

and ever" (1 Tim. 1:17)." America's greatest theologian went on to describe the impression these words made on his soul:

As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I have ever experienced before. Never any words of Scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be rapt up to him in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him for ever! I kept saying, and as it were singing over these words of Scripture to myself; and went to pray to God that I might enjoy him, and prayed in a manner quite different from what I used to do; with a new sort of affection.... An inward, sweet sense of these things, at times, came into my heart; and my soul was led away in pleasant views and contemplations of them. And my mind was greatly engaged to spend time in reading and meditating on Christ, on the beauty and excellency of his person, and the lovely way of salvation by free grace in him. [Jonathan Edwards, *A Personal Narrative*, quoted in Sam Storms, "Jonathan Edwards' Personal Narrative," *Enjoying God Ministries* (June 25, 2005).

⁹ C. S. Lewis, "A Word About Praising," *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958). Quoted by Sam Storms in his article, "Praise: The Consummation of Joy," *Desiring God*, 17 November 2013 [online]. Retrieved on 28 October 2023 at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/praise-the-consummation-of-joy>.

¹⁰ David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, Christ-centered Exposition Commentary, edited by David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 19-20.