

“The Greatest Sinner May Find Mercy”
(1 Timothy 1:12-16)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

We’ve looked so far in our series

At the lives of John Knox –

The reformer of Scotland –

And John Bunyan –

The author of Pilgrim’s Progress.

We’ve seen

That both provide us with examples of devotion –

Both committed themselves to doing

What they believed would honor their Lord –

Both give us examples of courage –

John Knox spoke the truth before nobility

In a country that had executed

Those who came before him,

And John Bunyan preached the Gospel

Knowing in advance he would likely be arrested –

And both were examples to us in these areas

Because they both took up spiritual weapons

And fought against the world, the flesh and the devil,

And by His grace, won the battle.

If we are to have their level
 Of devotion and courage,
 We must be willing to fight as well,
 With the same kind of endurance,
 With the same willingness to suffer.

B. Preview.

Today, we're going to consider another example
 Of one who was wholly devoted to Jesus Christ: John Newton.
 Newton, of course, is best remembered
 As the author of Amazing Grace,
 A hymn that exalts the mercy of God on sinners.

I want us to consider this morning
 How he was able to write that hymn:
 Remembering that it isn't merely about
 What the Lord has done for us –
 Or for anyone who is willing
 To put their trust in Him –
 But what He did for Newton himself –
 How God saved him when he was *a wretch*,
 As we'll see this evening.
 He was able to write it
 Because he experienced

God's love and mercy in Jesus Christ.

This provides us with the motive –

Why we should devote ourselves to the Lord:

It's because God is a gracious God

Who delights to show mercy

Even to the worst of sinners.

Jonathan Edwards once said:

It doesn't matter how great a sinner you are,

God can greatly glorify His grace through your salvation.

That's what Paul tells Timothy this morning.

II. Sermon.

A. We should first of all thank the Lord

That He is willing to use us in His kingdom.

That's what Paul does in verse 12, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service."

As far as He was concerned,

There was no greater blessing

Than being in God's kingdom –

Through faith in Jesus –

And there was no greater privilege

Than being used by God –

To advance that kingdom.

Why?

Because being in God's kingdom

Meant that he was safe

From the consequences of his sins;

And being used in God's kingdom

Meant not only that he was honoring his Lord,

But that he was storing up riches in heaven.

Nothing else really matters.

The things we gain of this world

Are only for this world:

When we die,

We must leave them all behind.

But we get to keep forever

The things we do for the Lord.

That's why Edwards writes

In a sermon on Luke 6:24, "This life is so short and so inconsiderable that it is no matter who prospers here and who does not. The only thing worth considering is who it is who prospers in an eternal state."

The way to prosper forever

Is *to serve* the Lord here.

When the ten disciples

Were upset with James and John

Because their mother asked Jesus to give them

The two greatest seats of honor in His kingdom,

Jesus told them the only way they could ever receive this blessing, “Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matt 20:26-28).

The more we humble ourselves here,

The more greatly the Lord will exalt us there.

The lower we stoop,

The higher He’ll lift us.

Jesus showed us this is true

Through His own life:

Paul writes, “Although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name” (Phil. 2:6-9).

B. How can we serve Him better?

1. First, we must be willing faithfully to do

Whatever He gives us to do –

Whether large or small –

He usually starts us off with something small

Before He gives us greater responsibility.

Jesus said in Luke 16:10, “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much.”

Paul was faithful in the small things –

He didn't begin as an apostle and missionary –

But he was faithful with what the Lord gave him to do,

And so the Lord gave him more –

Not only more responsibility,

But more strength so he could faithfully do it.

Notice again what he writes in verse 12, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, *who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful*, putting me into service” (1 Tim. 1:12).

If we are faithful with what He's entrusted to us,

He will also give us more.

Don't forget,

Whatever He gives us to do is a privilege –

Whether large or small –

Because it is a blessing just to serve Him.

The psalmist writes, “For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand *outside*.
I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God than dwell in the
tents of wickedness” (Ps. 84:10).

It's better to be

Even in the lowest position in God's kingdom,

Than to have the highest position

In the kingdom of darkness.

2. The second way we can serve Him better,

Is to stir ourselves up to greater thankfulness

And at the same time humble ourselves even more.

The way Paul did this,

Was simply to remember

What he was before the Lord saved him –

This, as we'll see this evening,

Was also what humbled and motivated Newton

To devote himself even more fully to the Lord.

Paul writes in verse 13, “even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor.”

Paul –

Like those we've considered in our Reformation Series –

Had a past,

And it wasn't a pretty one –

If we knew someone like him before his conversion

We might suspect he would be

The last person the Lord would use.

Paul was *a blasphemer* –

The word means to insult or slander someone.

Whom did Paul slander? Was it God?

Being a Pharisee,

That was probably the farthest thing from his mind.

And yet that's exactly what he did

When he spoke against Jesus.

Paul said in his testimony

Before King Agrippa and Festus,

“So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth” (Acts 26:9).

He even tried to compel Christians to do the same (v. 11).

He was *a persecutor* of the church.

We read in Acts 9, “Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (vv. 1-2).

And he was *a violent aggressor*:

He wrote to the Galatians, “For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it” (1:13).

He hated Jesus;

But since he couldn’t hurt Him –

Believing He was already dead –

He tried to destroy

Those who confessed and loved Him.

With a past like that,

We might wonder why

The Lord didn’t just strike him down

As He did Ananias and Sapphira

For lying to the Spirit (Acts 5:1-10);

Or Herod for persecuting the church,
Killing James (the brother of John),
Arresting Peter,
And taking the credit for the speech
God enabled him to deliver (Acts 12).

But God didn't strike him down –
Although Paul knew he deserved it –
He showed him mercy instead.

Why?

Paul writes, “Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief” (v. 13).

Does Paul mean to say
That his ignorance was an excuse?
That God is bound to show mercy
To everyone who sins without knowing they're sinning?
No.

We must always remember
That no one deserves His mercy –
And that God reserves the right
To show mercy to whomever He wants.

Paul writes in Romans 11:18, “So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.”

He may show mercy

To someone who knowingly breaks His commandments,
And not show mercy to someone who breaks them without knowing.

So what is Paul saying?

He's saying that though it's true

That God sovereignly shows mercy to whom He wills,

What we know or don't know

Still makes a difference to God:

The more we know,

The more culpable we are for our sins.

Jesus said on one occasion, "And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in *the day of judgment*, than for you" (Matt. 11:23-24).

We might have thought

That Sodom would be judged more severely.

But the Lord tells us,

It will be Capernaum,

Because they sinned against greater light –

More knowledge equals greater responsibility and culpability.

But what about Paul –

Didn't he have a lot of knowledge?

Because of his background,

He certainly had more than most.

And yet there is a sense

In which he was still ignorant –

He didn't realize Jesus was the Christ.

He thought he was serving God

By trying to destroy the church.

This doesn't excuse his sin,

But it does provide extenuating circumstances –

He hadn't committed the unpardonable sin

As some of his fellow Pharisees had done

When they accused Jesus of being in league with the devil

And excluded themselves forever from God's kingdom.

He was still capable of mercy,

And that's what the Lord showed him:

He gave Paul that faith

That works through love;

And Paul trusted Jesus

And he was saved.

He writes in verse 14, "And the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are *found* in Christ Jesus."

But he didn't deserve it –

It was purely of God's grace:

This humbled Paul

And stirred him up to even greater thankfulness,
So that he served his Lord
With greater zeal
And with a greater willingness
To suffer for Him.

The best way we can humble ourselves
And be more thankful,
So that we too will be moved
To devote ourselves more to His service
Is to remember what we were
Before the Lord saved us.
We might not have as bad a background as Paul's –
Or maybe ours is worse –
But either way,
There's plenty of room
To thank God for His mercy:
Every one of us has done more than enough
To have condemned our souls forever to hell –
The Lord didn't have to save us,
But He did,
And that should move us
To give ourselves more to His service.

C. Finally, why does God save sinners at all?

Why did He save someone as deep in sin as Paul?

Why did He save us?

It was that He might glorify –

That He might draw attention –

To His mercy and patience,

So that others would know there is hope for them.

Paul writes in verses 15-16, “It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost *of all*. Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.”

Paul didn’t excuse himself for his ignorance

Or the many sins he had committed:

He considered himself the worst of sinners:

He blasphemed God,

Persecuted His people,

And tried to destroy them.

Notice the present tense: “I am foremost of all.”

He still looked at himself in this way.

But that is *why* the Lord showed him mercy:

He wanted to use Paul as an example

To those who might think they were too bad –

They had sinned too much –

For the Lord to save them.

Think about Bunyan's life before Jesus.

Newton's was very similar.

So was Augustine and a host of others.

Why did the Lord save these men

Who publicly lived such wicked lives?

It's because He wanted to show the world

That He is willing to save even the greatest of sinners,

If they will only come to Him through His Son.

Jesus said to the Pharisees

When they asked His disciples

Why He eats with tax collectors and harlots:

"It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt. 9:12-13).

Jesus didn't come for those who think they're good enough –

He came for those who know they're sinners.

He's shown us that He's willing to save

Even the very worst of sinners.

This means, He's willing to save you,

If you don't know Him this morning.

All you need to do is trust Him to do it.

If that's what you want,
You're not too far gone;
You haven't committed the unpardonable sin.
If you want to come to Him,
Come, and He will receive you.
He won't turn any away that come to Him in faith.

If you do know Him this morning,
You know the Lord has done for you
What He did for Paul, for Augustine,
For Bunyan and for Newton –
He has saved you from your sins
That would have condemned you forever.
He wants you to remember that now,
As you come to His Table.

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