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1 Timothy 1:12-17 "Never Too Far Gone for Grace"***

Proposition: Paul's testimony in 1 Timothy 1:12-17 makes it clear that we're never too far gone for grace. The text invites us to consider two accomplishments of grace.

I. Consider what grace did for Paul (12-14).

A. Here's what was true (12).

1. He was thankful.
2. He was serving the Lord.

B. Here's what used to be true (13a).

1. He once was a blasphemer.
2. He once was a persecutor.
3. He once was a violent man.

C. Here's what made the difference (13b-14).

1. He experienced God's mercy (13b).

Key: God doesn't give us what we deserve.

2. He experienced God's grace (14).

Key: God gives us what we don't deserve.

II. Consider what grace can do for anyone (15-17).

A. Grace affects what Christ did (15).

1. He came into the world.
2. He came to save sinners.

B. Grace affects what Christ does (16).

1. He displays long-suffering.
2. He gives eternal life.

C. Grace affects what Christ deserves (17).

1. He is worthy of honor.
2. He is worthy of glory.

The Bottom Line: Two things we must never forget...

1. Our sin is great.
2. The grace of our Savior is greater.

It's my privilege today to begin a study of one of the most amazing subjects in the Bible. *Grace*. In the weeks ahead, we're going to explore five great texts about grace in the Bible. Today we turn our attention to one of the most dramatic accounts of grace to be found anywhere in God's Word. The text before us is staggering, even breathtaking.

It's amazing what a difference grace makes. It did in the life of Martin Luther, a former Roman Catholic monk, John Newton, a former slave trader, Chuck Colson, a former White House aide to President Nixon, and C. S. Lewis, a former skeptic. And the grace of God continues to transform lives. That's why we're here, isn't it?

But perhaps no story of grace is more remarkable than Paul's. Paul's testimony in 1 Timothy 1:12-17 makes it clear that no one is ever too far gone for grace. The text invites us to consider two accomplishments of grace.

I. Consider what grace did for Paul (12-14).

In the text before us, Paul becomes very autobiographical (you'll notice the first person pronouns "I" and "me" some six or eight times, depending on which translation you use). It's not that Paul liked to talk about himself.

In fact, Paul was ashamed of his past, as we'll see. But the reason he became transparent about himself was to accomplish his #1 goal in life, to exalt Jesus Christ.

The gospel had changed his life. I mean *really* changed him! He was not a self-made man. He was a grace-made man. He never got over what Jesus Christ had done for him. Can you relate? In verses 12-14 Paul shares three insights about himself.

A. Here's what was true (12).

The apostle speaks in verse 12, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service." What was true of Paul when he wrote this letter? First...

1. He was thankful. Ponder his words, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord." The literal reading is, "Grateful am I." And indeed, he was grateful. The words before us are packed with emotion. They come from the heart of a man who while on death row received a divine pardon, a man who knew he was utterly and absolutely dependent upon grace.

Paul couldn't write for long without bringing up the subject of grace. In fact, you'll find the subject of grace in every New Testament letter he wrote. It appears here in the letter he wrote to his protégé, a letter intended to encourage Timothy to deal with problems in the church at Ephesus. What is it that encourages us not to tackle the "hard cases" and not give up? It's the knowledge that no one is too far gone for grace!

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord. Those words came from the pen of a man who once hated the name of Christ, but no longer. What else was true of Paul?

2. He was serving the Lord. Why was Paul so thankful? He says, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, *appointing me to his service.*"

Throughout this account, Paul looks back to a day from which he never "recovered," the day Jesus met him on the road to Damascus.

If you had asked Paul, "Paul, why are you in the ministry?" he would have replied, "It's because of what the Lord has done in my life. He's the One who enabled me. He gave me the strength. He appointed me to His service."

By the way, don't miss that it was grace, not personal merit that qualified Paul for ministry. In 1 Corinthians 7:25 Paul describes himself as "one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy." It was Augustine who said, "God does not choose anyone who is worthy, but in choosing him renders him worthy."

Paul never got over the fact that the Lord chose him for service. The Greek word Paul used here, translated "service" by the NIV and "ministry" in the KJV is *diakonian*. It refers to lowly, humble serving.

Do you see serving as a privilege? If not, maybe it's because you've forgotten grace. When people grasp grace, you don't have to twist their arm to get them to serve.

The truth is, every believer should see himself as a minister, a servant. It's a great privilege, an undeserved privilege to serve. Indeed, we have been saved to serve.

Thankfulness and serving go hand in hand for the Christian. If you're thankful, you'll want to serve the Lord. When grace grips you, you'll want to serve Him.

William Barclay remarks, "Paul never had the feeling that he had chosen Christ, but always that Christ had

chosen him. It was as if, when he was heading straight for destruction, Jesus Christ had laid his hand upon his shoulder and arrested him in the way. It was as if, when he was busy throwing away his life, Jesus Christ had suddenly brought him to his senses."

That's why we serve Christ, beloved. Because of grace, His unmerited favor. When we get a handle on grace (or better yet, when grace gets a handle on us), we will count it a joy to serve the Lord.

That was Paul's perspective. He didn't seek honor for himself. The reason he served Christ was because he was so thankful for what the Lord had done for him.

That's insight #1, what was true of Paul. But that wasn't always the case...

B. Here's what used to be true (13a).

Listen to his confession (13-14): "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. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."

This is sacred ground, beloved. This is Paul's story, but it's more than that. It's a neon sign from the pages of Scripture that shouts to us, "No one is too far gone for the grace of God!"

"I was once," Paul says. Stop there. The word "once" ("before" in the KJV) looks to the past, to Paul's B.C. days. Here's what was true of Paul before Christ took hold of his life—three crimes.

1. *He once was a blasphemer.* Does it shock you that the man who wrote nearly half of the New Testament books was guilty of blasphemy? Paul's not saying that he had a dirty mouth in the sense of cussing--though that's a serious problem. Remember, he was a Pharisee, a man who was very reverent of God. Or at least he thought he was. It wasn't until later that he realized the truth about his mouth--he had blasphemed God.

A blasphemer is a person who slanders God and speaks evil of Him. You see, Paul (then Saul) had once thought Christians were a cult, and viewed Jesus Christ as a cult leader. He blasphemed the name of Jesus thinking he was doing God a favor. He even compelled others to blaspheme Jesus by trying to get Christians to renounce their allegiance to Jesus. Which brings us to crime #2...

2. *He once was a persecutor.* When you read the narrative of Acts 8, it's hard to imagine it's the same person who wrote 1 Timothy, but it is. Acts 8:3 records: "But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison."

Did you realize that the man who wrote, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain," had earlier hunted down Christians as if they were hardened criminals? Aren't you glad we're not doomed to be what we once were?

The fact is, Paul had an embarrassing past. What could be more humiliating for a Christian than to admit that he used to blaspheme God's name and persecute God's people? If anyone didn't "deserve" God's grace, it was Paul, according to his own admission. His third crime...

3. *He once was a violent man.* Did you realize that the author of the "love chapter" (1 Cor. 13) was once a violent aggressor? Listen to Acts 9:1-2:

"Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem."

Yes, Paul had done that. He confesses to us that he was once a violent man. By the way, the term depicts a

person who has no normal concern for human kindness. It conveys the idea of a haughty individual who throws his weight around and even uses violence to get what he wants. A modern equivalent would be "bully" or even "sadist."

That's what Paul once was, a blasphemous, Christian-hating bully. My friend, is there any less likely candidate for salvation than that?

Don't miss this. Yes, Paul had an embarrassing past, but he didn't ignore it, and certainly didn't condone it. He did talk about it. Why? Was he proud of what he had done? Are these the haughty words of a self-made man who's turned his life around and wants everybody to know it? Absolutely not. Why then? Because by rehearsing what used to be true he was able to exalt the grace of God.

There's a critical lesson here for us. Ask yourself something. Are you embarrassed about the sin in your life? Do you have a sense of shame over your sin? Frankly, we live in a society that's spent the last thirty years trying to get rid of shame and guilt. But until you come to grips with the greatness of your sin you will never appreciate the greatness of the Savior!

Insight #1, Paul shared what was true in the present—he was thankful and serving the Lord. Insight #2, Paul remembered what used to be true—he was once a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man. Insight #3...

C. Here's what made the difference (13b-14). Two related experiences...

1. *He experienced God's mercy (13b)*. "I was shown mercy," he says.

The question is, from whom? The verb is passive. Who is initiator of this showing of mercy? It's the Lord, isn't it? And why did Paul say he received mercy? It was because he'd acted in ignorance and unbelief.

We learn something very important about God right here. *God doesn't give us what we deserve*. We'd be in trouble if He did. The fact is, He gave what we deserve to His Son, Jesus, on the Cross. Paul says he experienced God's mercy. Secondly...

2. *He experienced God's grace (14)*. I often hear people say, "I don't know if I have what it takes to be a Christian." The simple truth is, we don't—but God does! Mercy and grace are what make change possible. God doesn't tell us, "Get your life cleaned up, and then come to Me." Rather, He says, "Come as you are, cast yourself upon My mercy and grace, and I'll do for you what you can't do for yourself. I'll give you exactly what you need!"

And just what do we need? When it comes to salvation, Paul says in verse 14 that God gave him three gifts he didn't deserve.

First, He gave him *grace*. "The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." Grace is the twin attribute of mercy. In His mercy, God doesn't give us what we deserve. But that's only half the story. In His grace, *God gives us what we don't deserve*.

But it's not just grace. It's "exceedingly abundant" grace, as the KJV puts it. God isn't stingy with grace. He lavishes us with grace. Abundant sin is no match for more than abundant grace! Author Jerry Bridges puts it this way, "Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the *reach* of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the *need* of God's grace."

Perhaps you're thinking, "Hold on, now. I grew up in a good Christian home. I didn't live a wild life. What about me? Am I really indebted to grace?"

God saved me when I was a child at the age of eleven. But the truth is, I have no glamorous story to tell. God didn't save me out of a horrendous past. Am I indebted to grace? Yes, indeed!

Know this. God saves some of us *out of* a life of sin. He saves others of us *from* a life of sin. Or to put it another way, in His grace, He saves us and keeps us from doing what our depraved hearts would gladly have done in time. In either case, He gets the glory, for salvation is all of grace.

Paul mentions a second gift in verse 14, *faith*. Please notice that God gives us faith. That's what verse 14 says. Saving faith is not something we come up with. It, too, is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8). In His grace, God not only gave us a Savior, but He gave us the faith to believe in the Savior.

The third gift is *love*. "The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." Just think of what Paul is saying: "God gave me faith to replace my previous unbelief, and God gave me love to replace my previous brutality!" That's how comprehensive God's work in salvation is.

Beloved, you cannot explain salvation apart from God's sovereign grace. If you deny God's sovereignty in salvation, how are you going to make sense of Paul's conversion? Was Paul seeking God? Hardly. He was seeking God's people, literally, seeking to hunt them down like criminals. He was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man whose aim was to get rid of Jesus' followers.

But the Lord sought him. The Lord caused the light to shine on him. The Lord humbled him, got his attention, stripped him of his religious facade, and then called him to follow Him.

How can you explain the transformation in the life of Paul apart from God's sovereignty and grace? You can't. But don't stop with Paul. What about your own salvation? Until you grasp what the Bible teaches about grace, you'll never appreciate God as you ought.

Which brings us to the second accomplishment of grace. We've considered what grace did for Paul. Now let's...

II. Consider what grace can do for anyone (15-17).

Frankly, the world doesn't understand grace. In his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, Philip Yancey remarks, "The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of *karma*, the Jewish covenant, and Muslim code of law--each of these offers a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional."

It's true. Paul is merely "exhibit A." What grace did for him, grace—and grace alone—can do for anyone. And I mean *anyone*. How can we know that? In verses 15-17 Paul puts the spotlight on three activities of Christ, each related to grace.

A. Grace affects what Christ did (15).

"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

Paul begins with the statement, "Here is a trustworthy saying," a clause which he uses five times, all in the pastoral epistles (see 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Tit. 3:8). Apparently, these were well-known statements in the early church, sayings that summarized key aspects of Christian doctrine. They weren't necessarily Scripture, but they contained Scriptural truth. Perhaps the sayings were part of a catechism or hymn.

We have them today. Finish the statement: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that _____." That's a trustworthy saying. Here's another: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the _____."

What does Paul indicate about this particular "trustworthy saying?" It "deserves full acceptance." This is no take-it-or-leave-it tidbit. This truth is weighty and worthy (which is what the Greek term *axios* means, "of weight, of worth"). Or to paraphrase, "This is heavy stuff! You'd better give attention to it!"

So what's the saying? It's comprised of only eight words in the Greek text, yet this handful of words is one of the most powerful summaries of the gospel to be found anywhere in the Bible. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Each word is packed with significance. We learn two things about our Savior.

1. *He came into the world.* Why would the Son of God leave the splendor of heaven to come to this sin-infested world? In a word, the answer is *grace*. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich yet for your sakes He became poor [speaking of His incarnation], so that you through His poverty might be made rich (2 Cor 8:9)." Because of grace, He came into the world. For what reason?

2. *He came to save sinners.* To save whom? *Sinners.* We must remember that the author who penned this word was a former Pharisee, a man who prior to meeting Jesus had a very warped view of what a *sinner* is.

As the Pharisees saw it, there were two groups of people: the righteous (that was how they saw themselves), and sinners (that was everybody else). A Pharisee wouldn't even eat with a "sinner." When the Pharisees wanted to heap abuse on Jesus, they called Him "a glutton, a drinker, and a *friend of sinners* (Luke 7:34)."

A Pharisee didn't see himself as a "sinner." Oh, he wasn't perfect, but he had enough religion to appear better than "sinners" out there--those who didn't know and live by the law, the scum, the lowlife, the riffraff.

For Paul, that's who "sinners" were, *other* people. That is, until he met Jesus. And once he saw Jesus, he never saw himself in the same light again.

"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--*of whom I am the worst.*" Paul couldn't contain himself. I am the *worst* sinner that Christ came to save.

That's quite a statement, isn't it? In our day many would interrupt, "No, Paul, don't say that! You need to pump up your self-esteem. After all, you're not responsible for what you did. It's those teachers down at Gamaliel's school of the Pharisees. They brainwashed you. You couldn't help yourself. It's also your parent's fault. They sent you to that school. And it's society's fault. You're not responsible for the fact that you were born into a legalistic environment that made you turn against Christians. No, Paul, it's not true. Let us help you restore your self-concept."

To which Paul would say, "No thank you. There's nothing wrong with my self-assessment. It's quite accurate. The truth is, I am a sinner, a great sinner, indeed the chief of sinners."

Not *was*, but *am*. Notice the present tense. Even years after his conversion, Paul still regrets his past and sees himself as a sinner. Yes, he's a fully pardoned sinner now, but he is still a sinner. Paul never forgot that he was a sinner.

Neither did John Newton, the writer of "Amazing Grace," and one of the great preachers in church history. Yet prior to his conversion, John Newton lived a debase life. He sailed the seas as a slave trader. After he was saved by God's grace, Newton wrote a text in big letters and placed it above the mantle of his study where he could not fail to see it: "Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt and the Lord thy God redeemed thee."

He also composed his own epitaph: "John Newton, Clerk, once an Infidel and Libertine, a Servant of Slaves

in Africa, Preserved, Restored, Pardoned, and Appointed to Preach the Faith he had so long laboured to destroy."

It's good for us to remember who we were. It keeps us from pride. The fact is, we would still be what we were if it were not for the grace of God.

Did you know that John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, also wrote a book entitled *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*? It's good to remember this. Christ came into the world to save *sinners*.

I'll put it bluntly. There is no hope for "*righteous*" people, that is, for people who naively see themselves as right with God based on something they have done. Jesus said: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners (Matt. 9:13)."

Listen. Jesus didn't come to help people save themselves, nor to give a pep-talk to bolster those with battered self-esteems so they'd try harder to reach God. No! He came to do what we *couldn't* do. He came to do the saving. He came to save sinners.

Joseph Hart understood that. Ponder his invitation:

*Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity, love, and power;
He is able, He is able,
He is willing, doubt no more;
He is able, He is able,
He is willing, doubt no more.*

*"Come, ye weary, heavy-laden,
Bruised and mangled by the fall;
If you tarry till you're better,
You will never come at all;
Not the righteous, not the righteous,
Sinners Jesus came to call.
Not the righteous, not the righteous,
Sinners Jesus came to call.*

Grace affects what Christ did—that's verse 15. Secondly...

B. Grace affects what Christ does (16).

"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."

What is it that Christ does because of grace? Paul mentions two things...

1. *He displays long-suffering.* Paul says the Lord displayed "unlimited patience" with him. The Savior *suffers long* with us. In addition...

2. *He gives eternal life.* The word "example" means "an outline, a sketch-plan, a first draft, a preliminary model." One translation uses the word "illustration." That's it. Paul says, "Look at me. I'm a God-given illustration. If God can save me, He can save anyone!"

But wait. Who does God save? Not everyone. Who, like Paul, will benefit from God's grace? Verse 16 says, those who "*believe on Him.*" It's not believe *about* Him, but believe *on* Him. What's required is to place your trust in Christ. If you believe on Him, He will give you eternal life.

Perhaps you're thinking, "This all sounds too good to be true. You don't know what I've done. I'm no candidate for Christ. My life is so messed up. I'm so unworthy. There's no hope for me."

If you're thinking those words, realize something. You're not the first who's thought them. The truth is, none of us deserve eternal life. Not one! We deserve eternal damnation. But salvation isn't a reward that God gives to deserving people. It's a gift He gives to those—and only to those—who will admit they don't deserve it!

If you are willing to admit you don't deserve to be saved, you are close to the kingdom! And you're in good company. The prototype is Paul, who said, "No one is less deserving of God's grace than me."

We're never beyond the reach of grace. What Jesus did for Paul He can do for anyone. Has it happened in your life? If you will call upon the name of Jesus Christ, He will save you—an undeserving, unworthy sinner—right now. I invite you to.

Grace affects what Christ did, what Christ does, and thirdly...

C. Grace affects what Christ deserves (17).

"Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."

God is the King. He's the *eternal* King. God exists outside of time, though He acts in it. He's not restricted by time.

The King is *immortal*. Unlike us, death and decay have no effect on God (Ps. 103:15-17). He never changes (Mal. 3:6). He is imperishable.

We live in the world of perishable things. Our teeth decay, our vision deteriorates, our joints need replaced. The grass in our yard turns brown in August. Our cars rust. Our roofs develop leaks. But God, the One who is immortal, is imperishable!

What's more, our King is *invisible*. Not only does that mean you can't see Him, it also indicates you couldn't know Him apart from His self-revelation.

In addition, our King is *the only God*. Indeed, there is no legitimate rival to Him. He's in a class all by Himself. Since that's what God is like, here's what He deserves.

1. *He is worthy of honor.* And...

2. *He is worthy of glory.* For how long? For ever and ever. In other words, *the King* deserves to be treated like the *King*! And because of His grace, He will be, for the result of salvation is that sinners give the King what He deserves.

One of the great preachers of the 19th century, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, was used of God to lead thousands to Christ. Spurgeon loved to speak of God's grace. Listen to his words:

"The purpose of God is not founded on any foreseen merit of ours, but upon His grace alone. It is grace, all grace, and nothing but grace from first to last. Man stands shivering outside, a condemned criminal, and God, sitting upon the throne, sends the herald to tell him that He is willing to receive sinners and to pardon them. The sinner replies, 'Well, I am willing to be pardoned if I am permitted to do something in order to earn pardon. If I can stand before the King and claim that I have done something to win His favor, I am quite willing to come.'

"However, the herald replies, 'No, if you are pardoned, you must understand that it is entirely and wholly an act of grace on God's part. He sees absolutely nothing good in you. He knows that there is nothing good in you. He is willing to take you just as you are--black, bad, wicked, and undeserving. He is willing to give you graciously what He would not sell to you for any price (Isaiah 55:1) and what He knows you cannot earn from Him. Will you receive it?'

"In the natural state, every man says, 'No, the very idea is abhorrent to me. I will not be saved in that style.' Well then, misguided soul, remember that you will never be saved at all, for God's way is salvation by grace. If ever you are saved, my dear one, you will have to confess that you never deserved or merited one single blessing from the God of grace. You will have to give all the glory to His holy name if you ever get to heaven."

The Bottom Line: Two things we must never forget...

1. *Our sin is great.* Paul saw himself as a sinner. Do you? Not just, "Oh, I've done a few things I'm not proud of in life, but who hasn't?" But rather, "I am a sinner. I have violated the holy standard of God. Intrinsic to who I am is a proclivity to sin, a heart that is bent on going its own way, away from God (Isa. 53:6).

Yes, our sin is great. But, thank God...

2. *The grace of our Savior is greater.*