

Main Idea: By his example in 1 Timothy 1:12-14, Paul teaches us to give thanks for two wonderful blessings: serving grace (12) and saving grace (13-14).

- I. Give thanks for serving grace (12).
 - A. The Lord enables.
 - B. The Lord enlists.
 - C. The Lord employs.
 1. When I understand grace, I'll express thanks.
 2. When I understand grace, I'll want to serve.
- II. Give thanks for saving grace (13-14).
 - A. God didn't give us what we deserve (13).
 1. Paul remembered what he did.
 2. Paul remembered what he got.
 - B. God gave us what we don't deserve (14).
 1. He gave us grace.
 2. He gave us faith.
 3. He gave us love.

Application: Let's daily express to the Lord three thank-lists.

1. Let's thank Him for evidences of grace in our lives.
2. Let's thank Him for evidences of grace in others' lives.
3. Let's thank Him for evidences of grace that never change.

Giving thanks isn't natural. Sinners don't naturally give thanks in God-pleasing ways. Even redeemed sinners don't. Left to ourselves, we tend to be selfish, even in the things for which we offer thanks.

Thankfully, the Lord has given us something very practical to help us. He's given us *models*. The pages of Scripture are filled with godly men and women who gave thanks. This morning we're going to invite one to tutor us.

We're going to look at Paul this morning, the model thanks-giver, specifically his expression of thanks in 1 Timothy 1:12-14. I should point out our text is no isolated event. Paul was constantly giving thanks. He used some form of the word “thank” 47 times in his letters, for he was continually expressing thanksgiving to the Lord, and wanted his readers to know it.

For instance...

Romans 1:8 “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.”

Romans 6:17 “But thanks be to God...”

1 Corinthians 1:4 “I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.”

1 Thessalonians 1:2 “We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.”

Philemon 4, “I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers.”

So Paul thanked God a lot, often for His work in other people's lives. But no subject caused thanks to spring from his lips more than what God, by His grace, had done in his own life.

It's my privilege today to lead us in examining one of the most dramatic accounts of grace to be found anywhere in the Bible. The text before us is very humbling, and

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¹ For an earlier development of this text in the 1 Timothy series, see 9/27/98.

motivating. It will help us to grow in our capacity to express thanks to the Lord in appropriate and meaningful ways, especially when life is hard and our thanks is prone to be tainted.

By his example in 1 Timothy 1:12-14, Paul teaches us to give thanks for two wonderful, life-changing, perspective-changing blessings.

I. Give thanks for serving grace (12).

The apostle Paul 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." Paul knew this--the only reason we have the privilege of serving the Lord is grace.

Paul's remarks grow out of a warning he gave to Timothy concerning false teachers. In verse 3, he urged Timothy to silence certain men who were plaguing the church at Ephesus with pseudo-biblical teaching. The Word of God was being misused. Specifically, as verse 7 indicates, zealous individuals were using the Old Testament law in a way God never intended.

Friends, you can use the Bible to prove just about anything *if* you yank verses out of context, *if* you ignore the biblical author's intent. That's why we must always ask two questions when engaging in Bible study. First, what does this verse say? And only after that question can we ask the second, what does this verse say *to me*?

It was that type of mishandling of the Scriptures that prompted Paul to address the proper use of the law in verses 8-11. In so doing, Paul contrasted the law and the gospel. The law can reveal sin, but it can't do anything about it. Only the gospel can. The gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to change people.

How did a former Pharisee like Paul ever get connected to the gospel in the first place? How did he become a minister of the gospel? He tells us in verse 11, "The glorious gospel of the blessed God *which he entrusted to me.*" God committed the gospel to Paul's care.

Why would God do that? Why would He choose a man like Paul for His service? That's the subject at hand in verses 12-17.

In the verses we'll be studying this time and next, 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.

You see, the law/gospel issue was no mere abstract matter for Paul. 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.

I can relate. Can't you? When I ponder what I'm doing today, and consider what was true of me before the Lord called me into the ministry, I'm amazed. I used to be shy and easily intimidated by what people thought, a people-pleaser, and self-absorbed. And though I still struggle with those same tendencies, the Lord daily enables me to overcome them so I can make Him known to people who need Him. How do you explain that? The same way Paul explained it.

Listen to what he says in verse 12, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord." The literal reading is, "Grateful am I." And indeed, he was grateful. The words before us are intense 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. Here he mentions two reasons he was indebted to grace. First, grace is what makes service possible. Perhaps you're wondering, "What does God do in His grace that makes service possible?" In reflecting on his own service, Paul mentions three divine activities.

A. The Lord enables. "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has enabled me (NIV 'given me strength')." Throughout this account, Paul is looking 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. I didn't come up with it." What else does the Lord do? According to Paul...

B. The Lord enlists. In Paul's case, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful." What does the Lord look for in a servant, anyway? Ability? Brains? Charisma? No. "Moreover it is required in stewards that a man be found *faithful* (1 Cor. 4:2)."

By the way, it was grace, not personal merit that made Paul so. 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." The Lord enlisted and used Paul because he was faithful, he was reliable, but even that was due to grace.

C. The Lord employs. "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, *appointing me to his service*." Paul never got over the fact that the Lord chose him for service. As the KJV puts it, "I thank Christ Jesus...[for] putting me into the ministry."

Let that sink in. The truth is, when I really understand grace, two things will happen.

1. *When I understand grace, I'll express thanks.* Paul did. "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord." He didn't just *think* it, but expressed it. Here he did it in writing, for Timothy and the church at Ephesus to see.

Again, Paul wasn't just a thanks-feeler, or thanks-thinker, but a thanks-giver. And so should we be, if we're gripped by grace.

When's the last time you fell to your knees and said, "O Lord Jesus, thank You for the ministry You've given me, the ministry with my Sunday School class, the ministry with my children, the ministry with my neighbors. I know You don't need me, and I know I'm undeserving, but thank You!"

Something else happens when I understand grace.

2. *When I understand grace, I'll want to serve.* The Greek word Paul used here, translated "service" by the NIV and "ministry" in the KJV is *diakonian*. It refers to lowly, humble serving. It's translated "deacon" in 1 Timothy 3.

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.

The Greek writer Plutarch tells a story (in Barclay) that illustrates the privilege of serving: "When a Spartan won a victory in the games, his reward was that he might stand beside his king in battle. A Spartan wrestler at the Olympic games was offered a very considerable bribe to abandon the struggle; but he refused. Finally, after a terrific effort, he won his victory. Someone said to him: 'Well, Spartan, what have you got out of this costly victory you have won?' He answered: 'I have won the privilege of standing in front of my king in battle.'"

That was Paul's perspective, too. 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.

Is that true of you? Do you view serving the Lord as a privilege? Is living for Jesus a delight to you, or merely a matter of duty? Beloved, 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.

So what have we learned so far from our tutor, the apostle Paul? As a thanks-giver, here's a great place to start. It's where he started. I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, for what? First, for serving grace. It's my joy today to serve Him because of His unmerited favor. You put me in this ministry, Lord. Thank You.

But don't stop with serving grace. There's something behind that, as Paul recognized.

II. Give thanks for saving grace (13-14).

Indeed, you cannot truly serve the Lord until you've been saved by the Lord. No one knew that better than Paul. 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 Paul's story, but it's so much more than that. It's a neon sign from the pages of Scripture that shouts, "No one is too far gone for the grace of God!" We learn two amazing truths about our salvation in verses 13-14.

When God saved us...

A. God didn't give us what we deserve (13). That's a good definition for mercy, the word Paul mentions in verse 13, "I obtained mercy." This is what makes salvation so incredible. God didn't give us what we deserve. It's good to remind ourselves what we deserve. It will keep us from being proud and stale in our Christian life.

Paul remembered. He tells us in verse 13 what he remembered.

1. Paul remembered what he did. "I was once." 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. He says, "I was once three things."

First, a *blasphemer*. Does it shock you that the man who wrote nearly half of the NT 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.

Did you ever blaspheme the name of Jesus? That's what Paul says he did.

Secondly, I 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 states: "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?

What did you do in your past that you now regret? The fact is, Paul had an embarrassing past. What could be more humiliating for a Christian than to admit that you used to blaspheme God's name and persecute God's people? If anyone didn't "deserve" God's grace, it was Paul.

But God doesn't save the deserving. To the contrary, by His grace He gives salvation to those, and only to those who admit they're not deserving!

Thirdly, I was a *violent man* ("injurious" in the AV). Again, think of it this way. The author of the most famous description of love in the world, it's used in wedding ceremonies, on wall plaques, in greeting cards, the "love chapter" of 1 Corinthians 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."

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?

Remember the context, too. Paul just finished talking about the OT law in verses 8-11. If anybody was a law specialist, it was Paul. As a Pharisee, he knew the law. But what he knew so well he broke so blatantly. As a blasphemer, he violated the first half of the Ten Commandments which speak of man's relationship to God. As a persecutor and a violent man, he violated the second half of the Decalogue which speaks of man's relationship to man.

It's as if Paul is crying out, "I was guilty of breaking the very law I piously thought I was defending! That's what I did!"

Don't miss this. Yes, Paul had an embarrassing past, but he didn't ignore it, nor condone it. He talked 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? Absolutely not. Why then? Because by remembering what he did 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 40 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!

So Paul remembered what he did, with all its God-defaming ugliness. But he didn't stop there, nor must we. Secondly...

2. *Paul remembered what he got*. Verse 13, "I was shown mercy." I obtained mercy. Question: From whom? The verb is passive. Who is initiator of this showing of mercy? It's the Lord, right?

Are you grateful for the Lord's mercy, for the fact that He doesn't give us what we deserve? You see, it's because of God's mercy that change is possible. It's not: change, get your life cleaned up, and then come to God. Rather, it's: cast yourself on God's mercy, and then He'll do what you can't do--He'll change you!

Why did God show mercy to a sinner like Paul? Paul mentions two reasons: "I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief."

Hold on. In what sense do ignorance and unbelief "excuse" sin? They don't. Is ignorance an excuse before God? No.

We need to understand Paul's Jewish background to grasp he means. Some people have a faulty view of the OT sacrificial system. They think that if you sinned in OT times, all you had to do was bring an animal sacrifice, and the problem was remedied. That kind of thinking fails to recognize that there are *two* categories of sin mentioned in the OT.

There are "unwitting" sins, and "presumptuous" sins (Lev. 5:15-19; Num. 15:22-31). There are sins of ignorance (the NIV calls them "unintentional" sins), and then there are sins of the "high hand" (defiant sins). If a person sinned in ignorance, he was permitted to bring a sacrifice to God for atonement. But if a person sinned knowingly, with a high hand, that person was to be cut off from his people. His guilt remained (Num. 15:30-31).

Jesus acknowledged this distinction from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34)." Ignorance doesn't save people, but because of divine mercy, it does postpone judgment.

The Lord postponed my judgment, says Paul.

And think about this. I wonder if Paul's salvation wasn't linked to Stephen's prayer in Acts 7:60. Remember, Paul was there, consenting to Stephen's unjust martyrdom. But just before the stones took his life, Stephen prayed aloud, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Paul had sinned in ignorance and unbelief. Remember his first words when Jesus blinded him on the road to Damascus? "Who are you, Lord (Acts 9:5)?" Paul was ignorant of the Lord (see also Acts 26:9-18). He was no hardened apostate. He simply didn't understand. That doesn't mean he wasn't guilty. Indeed he was. But his sin was linked to his ignorance and unbelief, so God extended His mercy to him. God didn't give him what he deserved. That's not all. In verse 14, we discover a second truth about our salvation. Namely, when God saved us...

B. God gave us what we don't deserve (14). "The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." When it comes to our salvation, what did God give us that we don't deserve? According to Paul, three things...

1. *He gave us grace.* "The grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant." Abundant sin is no match for more than abundant grace (see Rom. 5:20-21)! In *The Discipline of 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."²

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?"

I used to feel sort of bad when I would hear some people share their dramatic testimonies of being saved out of horrendous pasts. After all, God saved me when I was

² Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, 18

just a child. I had no glamorous story to tell. I felt cheated. Until this truth got a hold of me. God saves some of us *out of* a life of sin. He saves others of us *from* a life of sin. That is, 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.

2. *He gave us faith.* That's what verse 14 says. Please don't miss this. 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.

Have you ever thanked God for the faith He gave you so you could believe in His Son? You didn't come up with it. He gave it to you, and as with all His gifts, He deserves thanks. And...

3. *He gave us 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.

Brothers and sisters, we cannot explain salvation apart from God's sovereign grace. If we deny God's sovereignty in salvation, how are we 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, and gave him the faith and love to do so.

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

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 (from *Grace*, p. 51):

"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."

Dear ones, Spurgeon is right. We have not merited what God has given us, not one blessing. It all comes our way because of His amazing grace. And because it does, He deserves our constant and continual *thanks*.

Oh, what a difference grace makes! The question is, has it made, is it *making*, the difference it should in our lives?

"How do I tell?" you ask. Let me give you two questions to ponder...

First, are you a new person? Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose again. He promises to enter a person's life the moment that person repents and believes in Him. When a person does so, Jesus saves that individual from the penalty of sin, and begins to save that person from the power of sin. The question is, has that happened in your life? Has Jesus transformed you into a new person? If that's not the case, you may have religion, but you don't have Jesus. You may have a resume of good works, but you don't have grace. Are you a new person?

Second, if you are, who gets the credit? Far too often, we take credit for what God has done. How? By not thanking Him, and by not allowing others hear us thank Him. You see, when we grasp what the Bible teaches about grace, we make sure God gets the glory for what He has done.

Let's learn from our tutor, the apostle Paul. *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord.* Why Paul? *I thank Him because of His...serving grace*, and because of His *saving grace*.

To help us put this into practice, I want to reissue a challenge from last week.

Application: Let's daily express to the Lord three thank-lists.

1. *Let's thank Him for evidences of grace in our lives.* Were you able to bless someone with a meal this week, or lead your kids in a prayer time, or sing a song that encouraged someone's heart? Let's not commit plagiarism. Let's give credit to whom credit is due. "Thank You, Lord, for Your grace that made this possible!"

But let's not limit our thanks to ourselves. Paul didn't. Let's do what we see him doing in his NT letters.

2. *Let's thank Him for evidences of grace in others' lives.* For Paul it was, "I thank the Lord for your partnership in making the gospel known, Philippian church." And, "I thank the Lord that people are talking about your faith all over the world, Roman church." For us, it'll sound like this...

"Thank You, Lord, that Kay is making her faith in You known from her bed of affliction. This is an evidence of Your saving grace!"

"Thank You, Lord, for the 11 new member candidates who shared last Sunday with our deacons their testimonies of Your saving grace. What a blessing to hear, and You deserve all the credit!"

"And thank You, Lord Jesus, for Your serving grace that's enabling us to give generously to today's Harvest Offering for our Community Center."

Finally...

3. *Let's thank Him for evidences of grace that never change.* The health we enjoy, good times with our families, freedom in our country, these are evidences of God's grace. But they can change. But there are some evidences of grace that *never* change, and we should verbalize thanks for them too. "Thank You, Lord Jesus, for the home You are preparing for us in heaven. Thank You for Your promises that we can live by now, like Your promise of a good outcome (Rom 8:28-29) and your promise of wisdom (James 1:5). Thank You for your peace and joy and for the power of the gospel.