

Main Idea: 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. 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. 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.

Make It Personal: Two things we must never forget...

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

Scripture Reading: Exodus 34:1-10

We’ve been journeying through the book of Acts since February, but we’re going to take a break to launch a mini-series on a topic we need to revisit regularly. I’m calling our series, “**Amazing Grace,**” and in the weeks ahead, we’re going to explore five great texts in the Bible that teach us about grace.

Grace. God’s unmerited favor and help. God’s riches at Christ’s expense.

It’s amazing the 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, as every person in this room who has put their trust in Christ can attest.

Yet perhaps no story of grace is more remarkable than the one we’ll be considering this morning. The Christ-hating man who not only became a Christ-follower but whom God used to write half of the New Testament. Saul of Tarsus, who later became known by his Roman name, Paul, who shares his testimony in 1 Timothy 1:12-17, which makes it clear that no one is ever too far gone for grace.

Not us. Not the people in our lives who are not right with God. We are about to see what anyone can become by the grace of God. As we put ourselves in today’s text, we’re going to consider two accomplishments of grace.

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous message on this passage, see the “Amazed By Grace” series in 2001 at WBC.

I. What grace did for Paul (12-14)

In the first chapter of 1 Timothy 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 reality, Paul was ashamed of his past, as we'll see. But his transparency is linked to his chief aim in life, to exalt Jesus Christ.

Clearly Paul was not a self-made man (there is no such thing), but a grace-made man. He never got over what the grace of Jesus Christ had done for him. Paul tells us three things about himself in verses 12-14.

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." Literally, "Grateful am I." And indeed, he was grateful. The words are packed with emotion, coming 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 sovereign grace.

Paul couldn't write for long without bringing up the subject of grace. 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, as he seeks to encourage Timothy in dealing with problems in the church at Ephesus. What is it that encourages us to tackle the hard cases and not give up? It's the knowledge that a person is never beyond grace.

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, writes the man who once hated the name of Christ, but no longer. And for what specifically does Paul say he thanked Christ Jesus?

2. *He was serving the Lord.* This is why Paul was filled with thanks? "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 broke into his hell-bound life 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. He enabled me. He gave me the strength. He appointed me to His service."

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

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.²

Do you think of serving the Lord that way, as a privilege or an obligation? When we stop thinking about divine grace, it becomes a task to do. A job. An assignment. But when we ponder grace, it's not a job, it's a privilege to serve the Lord.

You don't have to twist the arm of grace-thinking people to get them to serve. It's a great privilege, an undeserved privilege to serve. Indeed, we have been saved by a gracious Master who served us and now gives us the privilege to serve.

² It's translated "deacon" in 1 Timothy 3.

Thankfulness and joyful service go hand in hand. If we're thankful, we'll want to serve the Lord, and do it joyfully. When grace grips us, we'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."

This is why we serve Him, 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.

This 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.

But that wasn't always the case for Paul.

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."

We're walking on sacred ground here. This is Paul's story, but more than that. It's a neon sign in the Bible that says to us, "No one is too far gone for the grace of God!"

"I was once," says Paul. Stop there. The word "once" ("before" in the KJV) looks to the past, to Paul's BC days. Here's what was true of Paul before Christ took ownership of his life, if you will, 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 curse words, though that's a serious problem. 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 in essence a Jewish cult, and viewed Jesus as their cult leader. Saul spoke against the name of Jesus thinking he was doing God a favor. He even compelled others to speak against Jesus by trying to get His followers to renounce their allegiance to Him. He was a blasphemer.

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 later wrote, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain," had earlier hunted down Christ-followers as if they were dangerous criminals? There's no escaping the fact that Paul had an embarrassing past. What could be more humiliating for a Christ-follower than to know that he used to blaspheme Christ's name and persecute His 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.*³ We're talking about the author of the "love chapter" (1 Cor. 13). That will come later. At this point in his life he is an aggressive angry man.

³ "Injurious" in the King James translation.

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."

That was his resume. He shares with Timothy that he was once a violent man, a term that depicts a person who lacks 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*.

That's what I was, says Paul, a blasphemous, Christ-follower-hating bully. My friend, is there any less likely candidate for salvation?

Don't miss this. 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 is now able to exalt the God of grace and the grace of God.

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

Paul tells us one more thing about himself. First, he shares what was true in the present, that he was thankful and serving the Lord. Second, he remembers what used to be true, that he was once a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man. Third...

C. Here's what made the difference (13b-14). To put it plainly, mercy and grace.

1. *He experienced God's mercy (13b).* "I was shown mercy," he says. The verb is passive. Who is initiator of this showing of mercy? It's the Lord, of course. He initiates the display of mercy, as He did with Paul.

And why did Paul say he received mercy? He says it's "because I acted in ignorance and unbelief." Ignorance (this wasn't a high handed sin of defiance; I was ignorant of what I was doing). And unbelief (here's the root of why I did what I did; I didn't believe what I should have believed).

We learn something very important about God right here. *God doesn't give us what we deserve.* That's what mercy is. We'd be in trouble if He did. The fact is, He gave what we deserve to His Son, Jesus, as He hung on the cross.

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." That's an easy objection to overcome. The simple truth is, no you don't, nor do I, nor does anyone else. But here's why you can and should become a Christian. God's mercy and grace. That's what makes becoming a Christian and then living the Christian life 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 tells us in verse 14. He says 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 His grace. He lavishes us with grace. Abundant sin is no match for more than abundant grace!⁴ 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."⁵

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. 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? Absolutely.

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 given the time. In either case, He gets the glory, for salvation is all of grace, and grace is all of Him.

Paul mentions a second divine gift in verse 14, *faith*. "The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly along with the *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." Not just grace, not just faith, but love too. Love was poured out on me abundantly in Christ Jesus. How did this once violent man become the author and example of 1 Corinthians 13? Paul tells us. 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 refuse to acknowledge divine sovereignty in salvation, how are you going to make sense of Paul's conversion? Was this man 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 His light to shine on him. The Lord humbled him, got his attention, stripped him of his religious facade, gave him grace, faith, and love, and then called him into His service.

How can you explain the transformation in the life of Paul apart from God's sovereignty and grace? You can't. But let's not stop with Paul. What about our own salvation experience? Until we affirm and celebrate what the Bible teaches about grace, we'll never respond as we ought to the wonder of God's saving work.

And this brings us to the second accomplishment of grace in our text. First, what grace did for Paul.

II. 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

⁴ see Rom. 5:20-21

⁵ *The Discipline of Grace*, 18.

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."⁶

It's true. Paul is exhibit A. What grace did for him, grace—and grace alone—can do for anyone. *Anyone*. How can we know that? In verses 15-17 Paul shows how grace is connected to three of Christ's activities.

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). These apparently were well-known sayings in the early church 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. Let me give you an example. 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 tell us about this particular "trustworthy saying?" He says it "deserves full acceptance." So this is no take-it-or-leave-it tidbit. This is something that's weighty and worthy (which is what the Greek term *axios* means, "of weight, of worth"). Or to paraphrase, "This is heavy stuff! We'd better give our 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. Each word is packed with significance.

"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Notice what Christ did.

1. *He came into the world.* Why would the Son of God do that? Why would He leave the splendor of heaven to come to this sin-infested world? 2 Corinthians 8:9 tells us, "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."

There's why. Grace, because of grace, He came into the world. But to what end?

2. *He came to save sinners.* Save whom? *Sinners*. What's a sinner? Keep in mind 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 knew he wasn't perfect, but he was living a pretty good life, for sure better than the "sinners" out there who didn't know and live by the law. He was a good man. They were the lowlife, the riffraff.

For Paul, that's who "sinners" were, *other* people. That is, until he met Jesus. And from that moment on 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.

⁶ Yancey, p. 3

What do you think of Paul's self-assessment? In our day many would interrupt, "No, Paul, don't say that! Sure, you made a few mistakes, but who hasn't? After all, it's not your fault for what you did. It's those teachers down at Gamaliel's school. They brainwashed you. It's 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-esteem. It's quite accurate. The truth is, I am a sinner, a great sinner, indeed the chief of sinners."

And notice this. Not *was*, but *am*, as in the present tense. This is twenty years after his conversion, but Paul still sees himself as a sinner. Granted, he's a fully pardoned sinner now, as he says elsewhere,⁷ but he is still a sinner.⁸ He never forgot that he was a sinner.

Neither did John Newton. We know him as the writer of "Amazing Grace" and one of the great preachers in the history of the church. But he saw himself as...remember the word he used? A *wretch*. He knew what he had done, the wicked life he had lived 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."⁹

It's good for us to remember who we were, who we would still be were it not for the grace of God. John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, wrote another book entitled *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. We get into trouble when we stop remembering. Christ came into the world to save *sinners*.

Friends, there is no hope for *righteous* people, 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)."

Jesus didn't come to help us save ourselves. 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, my fellow sinner...

*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. But there's more.

B. Grace affects what Christ does (16).

⁷ Romans 8:1

⁸ As W. Hendriksen observes.

⁹Barclay, 46.

“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.

2. *He gives eternal life.* Paul says God did what He did with me as an “example,” a word that 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 an illustration of what God can do. If He can save me, He can save anyone!”

But wait. Who does God save? Not everyone. Who will benefit from God’s grace, as Paul did? Verse 16 says, those who “*believe on Him.*” It’s not enough to believe *about* Him, but believe *on* Him. What’s required is to place one’s trust in Him, to make Christ one’s foundation. Those who do that are those who receive 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 God. I’m so unworthy. There’s no hope for me.”

If that’s what you’re thinking, please hear these words. It’s not just you. None of us deserve eternal life. Not one! As sinners, we all deserve eternal punishment for what we’ve done to God. 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 and believe upon the One who does.

So if you are willing to admit you don’t deserve to be saved, you’re in good company. You’re just like Paul who said, “No one is less deserving than me.”

We’re never beyond the reach of grace. What Jesus did for Paul He can do for anyone. If you will call upon the name of Jesus Christ, He will save you—an undeserving, unworthy sinner—right now. Why not now, my friend?

And this brings us to a third and final connection. First, grace affects what Christ did, second, 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.”

Who is God? God is the King. He’s the *eternal* King. He exists outside of time, is not restricted by time, but has chosen to act in and through time.

He is the *immortal* King. Unlike us, death and decay have no effect on Him (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 leaves turn brown and drop. Our cars rust. Our roofs develop leaks. But the King, the One who is eternal, is also immortal and imperishable!

What’s more, the 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. That’s why you need the Bible, and church, things He has given us so we can know Him who is invisible.

Furthermore, the King is *the only God*. There is no legitimate rival to Him. He’s in a class all by Himself. The only God.

And this this is all true of the King, here’s what He deserves.

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

2. *He is worthy of glory.* To the King be honor. And glory.

For how long? For ever and ever, says the beneficially of grace. According to Paul, *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.

In the 19th century God used Charles Haddon Spurgeon, to lead thousands to Christ. Spurgeon loved to speak of God's grace. Listen to his words:¹⁰

"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."

Make It Personal: Two things we must never forget...

1. *Our sin is great.* Paul saw himself as a sinner. Is that how you see yourself? 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 a heart that is bent on going its own way, away from God (Isa. 53:6). I have violated God's holy law and am guilty. I am a sinner."

This is the truth, dear friend. Our sin is great, and we must admit it. And this...

2. *The grace of our Savior is greater.* We are never beyond grace. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind but now I see."

¹⁰ *Grace*, p. 51.