

The Genealogy of a Christian

The Right Use of God's Law

1Tim 1:12 I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service,
¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,

¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

¹⁷ To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

(1 Timothy 1:12-17)

Saul: A Short Biography

Genealogy

Saul was a **Benjamite**, the smallest of the twelve tribes of Israel. And yet God chose him. This tiny biography fits two people in the Bible. The first is **king Saul**, the first king of

Israel chosen by God for this exalted position. The second is the NT counterpart, [Saul of Tarsus](#).

It is important to understand who this second Saul was and more important to understand what he thought of himself. He explains his self-image in [Philippians 3:4-6](#). “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day...” [Circumcision](#) was the great badge of honor that proved a man was one of God’s people. The [eighth day](#) demonstrates that he had this badge his entire life. He was born into it. Thus, he continues, “[of the people of Israel...](#)” God’s [chosen nation](#).

But, he adds, “[of the tribe of Benjamin.](#)” This is Saul’s [genealogy](#). Fee remarks,

Gentiles could become members only of Israel; his membership was of a kind whereby he could [trace his family origins](#). He belonged to the tribe of Benjamin, that favored tribe from whom came his namesake Saul, Israel’s first king, the tribe blessed by Moses as “[the beloved of the Lord ... whom the Lord loves \[and who\] rest between his shoulders](#)” ([Deut 33:12](#)), in whose territory sat the Holy City itself. They were also notable because they alone joined Judah in loyalty to the Davidic covenant. It is not difficult to hear a

ring of pride in this little reminder, which then calls for the next designation.¹

That designation is, “a Hebrew of Hebrews.” Fee says, “This is the ‘swing’ term, summing up the preceding three, and setting the stage for the final three. He was in every way a ‘Hebrew, born of pure Hebrew stock.’”²

Blameless

Now comes the truly remarkable view of himself. “As to the law, a Pharisee...” The meaning of this is discovered in [Acts 26:5](#) and [Gal 1:14](#). Saul he had progressed in Judaism far beyond his colleagues because he was “extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.” Thus, “according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee.” Pharisees, you see, **did not view themselves** the way you probably do, post-New Testament. Because of Jesus, we think of them as snakes and vipers, white-washed tombs, children of the devil. Yet, these were the most religious, conservative, dedicated, zealous, fiercely biblically minded men in ancient Israel. Hence, his last two appellations, “as to

¹ [Gordon D. Fee](#), *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 307.

² *Ibid.*

zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

How can anyone possibly think of themselves this way? **Blameless**? Sometimes translated as perfect?³ How could a person read God’s law, indeed memorize the entirety of God’s law, even the whole of the OT, and come away thinking that they are blameless according to it, even to the point of using it to **justify murder**? What do I mean by justify murder? That’s precisely what Saul presided over.

Saul was fiercely opposed to Christianity. **Acts 7** is a **climactic moment** of the early portions of the book. In it, one of **the first officers of the church** was put **on trial** because of his testimony about Jesus. At the end of the longest sermon in the book, **Stephen** calls the Jews who are putting him on trial, “**stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears ... always resist[ing] the Holy Spirit**” (**Acts 7:51**). “**Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it**” (**52-53**). This **infuriated the Jews**,

³ Only God’s Word Translation, which I had never heard of, uses this word here. However, in the OT when the LXX uses this same word (*amamptos*), English translations often use “perfect” for the Hebrew (cf. Gen 17:1; Job 1:1; etc.).

causing their religious zeal to boil over like exploding lava from a volcano. They ground their teeth at him, and in a rage, they cast him out of the city and stoned him to death. And, it says, “the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul” (58). Saul presided over the whole sorted affair. Even at a young age, he was the presiding overseer of the murder of the first Christian. “Saul approved of his execution” (8:1), not merely intellectually, but politically.

Not only this, a chapter later we read that Saul continued “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (9:1). Here was a man so consumed in the burning fire of his own self-righteousness that he went to the high priest and asked for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, a city not even in Israel, so that he might hunt down the Christians, men and women, bind them hand and foot, carry them away to Jerusalem, and put them to death. That’s how spiritually blind Saul was. He thought himself as saved as a man could get, saved by his own goodness, saved by his own zeal to carry out God’s will. Blameless. Faultless. Without sin.

And then, he met Jesus.

Saul's **encounter with the risen Christ** on the way to Damascus is perhaps the most important conversion story ever told. It was so important to Luke, that he tells it three different times (**Acts 9, 22, 26**)! This is the way of it (according to ch. 9). As he approached the pagan city, he suddenly saw a **light from heaven**. This caused him to **fall on the ground**. Accompanying the light was a **voice**. The voice was intelligible, specific, and direct. "**Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?**" When he asked who was talking, the Word said, "**I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.**"

Everyone present with Saul was **speechless**. They all heard the voice but saw no one. Saul rose from the ground and discovered that he was now physically **blind**. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. This blindness lasted three days and ate and drank nothing.

Meanwhile, there was a Christian in the city named **Ananias**. Jesus had also spoken to him, in a vision. He told this man to go to a certain street and a specific house where he would find Saul of Tarsus. He was told that Saul has seen this same vision where you will go to him and lay your hands on him and restore his sight.

Ananias was stunned. “Do you not realize how evil he is and that he seeks to murder all the Christians? And, he has the authority and power to do it.”

But the Lord was insistent telling him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” From that moment onward, the Bible never again calls him *Saul*, meaning “demanded” or “required” again. Instead, he is called *Paul*: “little” or “stop, desist.”⁴ We might say that God no longer *demanded* anything of Saul except to *desist* and rest in true grace. From then on, he identified himself as *small* rather than great in his own eyes.

It never ceases to amaze me that anyone could undertake a serious study of the OT and come away concluding that they are blameless. **How on earth** can you read over 600 laws and conclude such a thing. And yet, this is precisely what far too many did and still do. This is very much what our Lord’s half-brother **James** said *not* to do. Like looking at themselves in a **mirror**, they see themselves in it, but immediately go away and forget what they look like (**James 1:23**).

⁴ The Greek noun *pauros* means feeble or little (as does the Latin *paulatim*). The verb *pauo* means stop, retrain, desist. The Greek *paula* means rest, cessation. The Hebrew verb *pa’a* may be related. It means to propagate a call for support.

But there is another way of thinking about this mirror that I believe captures the essence of this self-deception. It is told in the ancient tale of **Narcissus and Echo**. This story reads more like a fable than a myth. That is, it is a story with a moral to it. This was the way of it. Narkissos (Narcissus), the son of a river-god and a fountain-nymph was so **gorgeous** at birth that his mother sought out the famed blind prophet of Apollo, Tiresias, to discover what would happen to the lad. She desperately hoped that he might live to a ripe old age, but was concerned because of his beauty. When she found the prophet, he stated cryptically that, “**If he but fail to recognize himself, a long life he may have.**” What could this mean?

When he had reached the age of manhood, his **famous magnificence preceded him** wherever he went. One day, a noisy nymph named **Echo** spied Narcissus on a hunt. She lusted after him immediately and began to follow him like a stalker. The more she followed him, “**the hotter did she burn**” (Ovid, *Metamorphosis*). Suddenly, the magnificent man heard a noise. “**Who is here?**” “**Here!**” Echo replied. The poor girl had been cursed by Hera to babble and repeat the voices of others as punishment for her impetuous tongue that always interrupted everyone she was around. “**Come**

here!” “*Come here...*” came the echo. “**Avoid me not!**” “**Avoid me not...**” the voice faded in return, and she reached out her arms and grabbed his neck from behind.

“**Take your hands off me. Better death than such a one should ever caress me!**” “**Caress me,**” came the pale reply of unrequited love. And thus, in his rejection of the girl, she remains forever wasting away somewhere in the deep woods, wandering the lonely caverns in the hills, wakeful with sorrows, shriveled up, melting away, her voice always dissolving into the winds. **Infatuation** leads to the withering of the soul.

Narcissus’ life was in this way filled with the obsessions by all who saw him. It became taxing, tiresome, a great and heavy burden. One day, **a young boy** saw him, and the same thing happened (I’m adding this to the story because remember, in 1 Timothy, **homosexuality** is one of the sins specifically pointed out). Narcissus rejected him like all the others. **Ameinias** became so distraught that he killed himself at Narcissus’ door, but not before crying out to the goddess Nemesis to avenge him.

As her name implies, **Nemesis** took revenge and one day, as Narcissus was walking in the forest, he saw a pool of water. As he bent down to take handful, he saw his own

reflection in the mirror of the water. Immediately, he became infatuated with it, like all the others. Never again did he leave that pool, but simply sat there, transfixed by his own beauty, motionless as a stone statue, until finally he withered away and was transformed by the nymphs into a narcissus flower.

It is from this story that we derive our English word **narcissist**. A narcissist is someone who is **totally in love with themselves**. I believe, when too many people come to God's word, for a reason that would be inexplicable if I did not have Holy Scripture, this is how they view that mirror. They see the law and in it, their own beautiful *obedience* to it. It's remarkable. They become infatuated with their own blamelessness, when they should be immediately halted by their own rebellion. Some, who long to possess that same beauty which they know they do not have, see it and despair, and become echoes, wraiths on the wind driven by despondency.

This can happen not only in the secular realm of unrequited love, but even when people approach the Bible *as an end to itself*. *Until* one is confronted by the Glory of Jesus Christ. Our same Paul told the Corinthians about ancient Israel. “**Their minds were hardened. [And] to this day, when**

they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, *because only through Christ is it taken away*. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed” (2Co 3:14-16). This is like Jesus who told the Pharisees, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (Jn 5:39-40). That was Saul.

Structure and Context

We saw last time that the OT law has several uses. Its first and thus most pressing is a didactic use. That is, it *teaches* us (the Greek verb for “teach” is *didaskō*). Specifically, it teaches us *our sin*. That is, it is a mirror that shows us what we really look like. It teaches us that we are not morally magnificent! After this, since that image in the mirror is only truly perceived in the face of Christ—the only Perfect One, the only Beautiful One, it teaches us not to despond and wither away, but to flee to him for grace and mercy.

We are looking at 1 Tim 1:12-17. In it, the Apostle, after having just talked about the law and its three uses, and added at the end a comment about the “*gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted*” (11),

suddenly bursts into **thankfulness to Christ (12)**. This in turn causes him to give a short **biography** of himself *as he now* views his former life, not as he viewed it in his prior condition. This in turn causes him to return to a state of **thankfulness** which centers upon a “**trustworthy saying**” (the **first of four** in these two letters, and of five if you count the one in Titus) that he wants Timothy to never to forget. The whole six verse set thus forms a nice **chiastic structure** that demonstrates this is its own unit of thought.

- A. “I **thank** him [Christ Jesus our Lord]” (1:12-13a)
- B. “I **received mercy because**” – the **Lord’s grace** (13b-14)
- C. A Trustworthy saying (15)**
- B’. “I **received mercy for this reason...**” – **Jesus’ patience** (16)
- A’. Paul **praises** the Father (17)

However, we might ask, **why does Paul suddenly talk like this?** What’s the logic behind it? This takes us to the broader context of the first chapter and the letter as a whole. Understanding especially what he is doing in this chapter is very important for realizing why Paul goes on this short doxology. The fact is, Paul is elaborating on all he has said about the law and the false teachers, and what he will say next about them, by turning to his own personal experience. **The best of theology must always have a personal, experiential referent**, otherwise it

is just a head-trip, a mind-game, an exercise in futility. That is why false professors leave Christianity. It was never real *to them*. Good doctrine means nothing if it has not literally transformed you into a child of God.

Concerning the chapter, first, we are in the middle of a broader unit that goes from approximately **1Tim 1:3-20**. Some have labeled this entire unit as something like “**Fight the Good fight**”⁵ or “**Confronting the False Teaching.**”⁶ As we saw in the introductory sermon, the unit is chiastically parallel to the end of the book (**6:12-21**). To better understand why Paul talks about what he talks about in our pericope today, let’s look at the logic of his discussion through an outline:

1. Why and How to Teach (3-5)
2. Using the Old Testament wrongly (6-7)
3. Using the Old Testament correctly (8-11)
4. **The Law confirms to Paul that he is a sinner (12-17)**
5. How the Law deals with Hymenaeus and Alexander (18-20)⁷

After the introduction, he explains to Timothy his vital calling to **teach right doctrine** (#1). This specifically concerned “**myths and genealogies**” which we saw were

⁵ Marko A. Nagasawa, “The Implications of the Chiastic Structure of 1 Timothy on the Question of Women in Church Leadership,” New Humanity Institute (July 13, 2021), http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/paul_1timothy-chiasm-&-women-as-elders.pdf.

⁶ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2323–2324.

⁷ Nagasawa, 1-2.

perversions of OT stories and genealogies which somehow the false teachers were using to prove their own authority and to take people's eyes off Christ.

This in turn led to them deeply **perverting the law of God** (#2). The law here was specifically the **Ten Commandments** (#3). They seem to have been giving people a license to break these, while at the same time they created their own man-made legalistic laws that they insisted were what made people truly Christians.

But Paul had talked about a right uses of the law, and what he does in our section now is demonstrate through **personal example** what the law is supposed to do. Specifically, it **confirms that he is a sinner** (#4). This will lead to what the law says is to happen to those in the church who pervert all these things (#5).

Two more points will be important to see before going into the specifics. The first reinforces this point. Our unit is directly parallel to **1:7-9**. In the former, he talks about the **excellence of the law**, even in the midst of unrepentant people. Our passage is really about the **excellence of the King** and his mercy toward the unrepentant:

- A) 1 Tim 1:2-3, To **Timothy**, a **true son** in the faith: **charge** some that they teach no other doctrine;
- B) 1 Tim 1:4, **Fables** + endless genealogies, **which cause disputes** rather than godly edification;
- C) 1 Tim 1:5-6, Purpose of Law: pure love + **good conscience** + sincere **faith**, **some** having **strayed**;
- D) 1 Tim 1:7-9, The excellence of the Law toward the unrepentant;**
- E) 1 Tim 1:9-10, Meant for the **lawless**, **unrighteous**, those things **contrary** to sound doctrine;
- F) 1 Tim 1:11, According to the glorious **gospel** of the blessed God which was **committed to my trust**;
- central axis) 1 Tim 1:12, I thank Christ Jesus;**
- F') 1 Tim 1:12, He **enabled** me, **counted** me faithful, **put me into the ministry**;
- E') 1 Tim 1:13, Although formerly a **blasphemer**, a **persecutor**, and an **insolent** man;
- D') 1 Tim 1:13-17, The excellence of the King and His mercy toward the repentant;**
- C') 1 Tim 1:18, This **charge** I commit to you, **my son Timothy**;
- B') 1 Tim 1:18, **Prophecies** concerning you, **which cause** you to wage the **good warfare**;
- A') 1 Tim 1:19-20, Having **faith** + **good conscience**, which **some** rejected + **shipwrecked their faith**.⁸

Smith writes of this,

[This] pair left out at me ... The Law is the flip side of Mercy, and both express the love of God. The Law is love

⁸ **Christine Smith**, "1 Timothy 1," *A Little Perspective* (Sept 23, 2016), <https://www.alittleperspective.com/1-timothy-1-2016/>. I have relabeled her lettering because it is difficult to decipher, as she has sub-units in this particular look at the chiasm. Thus, note that center, F', and E' are all single verses, while D' is a unit. She has a simpler chiasm here. **Christine Smith**, "Book of 1 Timothy Chiastic Structure," *A Little Perspective* (Nov 4, 2013), <https://www.alittleperspective.com/book-of-1-timothy-chiastic-structure/>. See also **DPR**, "1 Timothy 1:1-20," *Biblical Chiasm Exchange* (Jan 16, 2015), <https://www.chiasmusxchange.com/2015/01/16/1timothy-1/>. This person sees virtually the same outline.

for the unrepentant, because the greatest gift someone can give someone else who is unrepentant in their sin, is the knowledge that their sin is evil and will cause their ultimate destruction. And Mercy is love for the repentant, because the instant someone's knees hit the ground, saying, I repent of my sin, God in His great love extends mercy which covers the multitude of their sins and transgressions of the Law.⁹

Second, I believe that Paul's talk of himself here as well as in vs. 1 is directly **related to the genealogical controversy** that he spoke about in vs. 4. Paul's explanation of himself is how the Christian should be thinking about their authority and roots. It is the diametrical opposite of the heretics.

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Thanksgiving

The very **center of the chapter**, both structurally, and if you exclude the introduction, by verse is **vs. 12**. **"I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service."** **Are you a thankful person?** Are you thankful for whatever

⁹ Smith, "1 Timothy 1."

comes into your life? Most everyone talks about being thankful from time to time. They usually want to be thankful for good things. A few understand the importance of being thankful for bad things.

I'm always struck at the unbeliever and wonder, **who are they thankful to?** Thanksgiving must have an object. When something out of their control happens and it is good, who are they thankful to? Perhaps a person. But what if no person was involved? Are they thankful to an impersonal force, to karma, to fate? What sense does it make to thank fate? In this way, it seems to me that this kind of thanks is really pretty meaningless, though I'm thankful for them that they want to be thankful. It demonstrates that they are still made in the image of God.

But thankfulness for the Apostle has **an object**. “**He who has given me strength**” (12). Strength for what? In this case, it is strength that he has been found a **faithful servant** (12b). This servant has been entrusted with a most **precious gift**—“**the gospel of the glory of the blessed God**” to which he had been entrusted (11). This Gospel is the good news. It is the good news of a very specific historical person. That person is Jesus Christ and his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. That is, God became man, lived perfectly

under the law, died as a sacrifice for sin in the place of sinners, rose from the dead by his own power vindicating him as innocent, and ascended to the right hand of power in heaven, King of kings over all of heaven and earth. It is an announcement that you can't get apart from someone telling it to you, because it is an historical fact, and you weren't there to see it yourself.

The Apostle had been *entrusted with this Gospel*, to spread it far and wide, by the command of God our Savior (that is the Father) and of Christ Jesus our hope (1). This command came through the very voice of Christ on the Damascus Road where Saul became Paul. Thus, he identifies himself as “*an apostle of Christ Jesus*” by this direct command (1a). So now, he thanks this same Christ Jesus. Jesus is the object of his thanksgiving. *It was Jesus* who commanded him to be an Apostle. *It was Jesus* who sent him with the message of the Gospel to the four corners of the earth. *It was Jesus* who had given him strength to endure the persecution and suffering he would endure for it. *It was Jesus* who judged him faithful. *It was Jesus* who appointed him to his service. Is the object of your thanksgiving Jesus Christ and God his Father? If not, then your thanksgiving is either idolatry or words blowing in the wind.

Mercy to Sinners

But there's something deeper than Christ's protection through this difficult call that he gave him that causes thankfulness to erupt in Paul. It is Christ's call *to salvation*. A lot of people have the wrong idea about the call to salvation. They rightly understand that they must respond to it. But they inappropriately and unbiblically believe that this call and their response is *due to something good in themselves*. This is not why Christ calls a person and it is not what causes a person to respond.

The key to understanding this is not some debate over freewill vs. predestination, like so many think. That debate is simply the logical outflow of something that must come before it. That something is simply looking in the mirror of the law to see what kind of a person you are like. This is what Paul now does and why I spent so much time looking at what he used to think he was like. But now that he has met the living Lord, he adds to his thankfulness this astonishing realization, "... though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent" (13).

Let the seriousness of these crimes wash over you like a flood. He says that he was a blasphemer. Let the

consequences of this particular crime from Leviticus hit you. “Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD *shall surely be put to death*. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, *shall be put to death*” (Lev 24:16). The very thing he was doing to Christians is what he now realizes that *he* deserved. But it gets even worse.

Saul was murdering Christians, doing so thinking that he was obeying this very law! He believed that *they* were blaspheming. Why? Because they were **making a man equal with God**. We find this identical thinking from Pharisees throughout the Gospels. However, what Paul came to understand was the crime here specifically relates **to the Son**, not the Father. It is blasphemy of “*the Name*.” Throughout the OT and NT, **Jesus is the Name of God**. Only once he met Jesus did he come to see that it was he, for rejecting the Messiah, who was blaspheming the Name, not the Christians. He deserved to be put to death, not them.

Yet, put them to death, as we have seen, is precisely what he was doing. He calls himself a “**persecutor**.” He was persecuting the Christians. And yet, on that road, do you remember what Jesus said? “**Why are you persecuting me?**” (Acts 9:4). **Me?** Saul wanted to know who was speaking and

the answer came back, “I am Jesus.” I Am. Jesus. God was speaking to him and he was telling this Pharisee that as many as he persecuted from his Body, he persecuted him. The church and Christ are one.

What kind of a man did this make Saul as he was on the road? Was he one who was seeking the Lord or one who already through he had found him? One who was ready, willing, and able to convert of his own freewill or one whose will was so bound by his sin that he couldn't see the truth in front of his face enough to make any kind of a right choice? He calls himself an “insolent opponent.” Not merely an opponent of Christ, an adversary. But on insolent one. Putting all these words together and using synonyms for “insolent” in English we can see that Saul was a blaspheming, persecuting, insolent, impertinent, audacious, disrespectful, brazen, bald-faced, brassy, and impudent opponent and adversary of Jesus Christ. What do you think that kind of man's “freewill” is going to do if all he heard was a still, small voice whispering in his ear to please let me into your heart while I knock quietly on the outside? No, what comes before any talk of the nature of our will is the realization of our depravity. And that should put an end to any propping up of a human will in terms of salvation.

“But I received mercy...” Mercy is not what some neutral party just trying to weigh the best of two decisions rationally and logically receives. Mercy is what *criminals* receive. Paul now realizes that he was a criminal and that he had committed treason against the very God that he thought he was worshiping.

He adds something to this however. “...because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief” (13). *The Dutch Annotations*, notes found in the Synod of Dort’s commissioning of a new Dutch translation (1637) says,

Paul says mercy was shown to him, seeing he was ignorant of the divinity and truth of the gospel, wherefore he does not excuse himself ... But he gives hereby to understand that his sin was not the sin against the Holy Ghost, done out of obstinacy and hatred of the known truth, and therefore pardonable through the grace and merits of Christ.¹⁰

What was this mercy based upon? Ryken states the obvious, but something that for too many isn’t as obvious as it should be. “The man received mercy because God is merciful. As Paul explained on another occasion, God ‘saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according

¹⁰ Lee Gatiss, Bradley G. Green, and Timothy George, eds., *1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon: New Testament*, vol. XII, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019), 127.

to his own mercy' (Titus 3:5). It was only by the grace of God that Paul was found when he was lost, and enabled to see when he was blind."¹¹

Grace in Christ Jesus

Grace is the flip side. If mercy is not getting what you deserve (punishment), **grace** is getting something glorious that you do *not* deserve (gifts). And grace comes up immediately after mercy in Paul's autobiography. "I received mercy ... and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." Notice the two things that are gifts of grace.

The first is **faith**. Faith is the ability to believe and be assured of something that unseen and hoped for. It is the gift of God that comes through the hearing of the good news that God will freely pardon any sinner who heeds his call. When you hear what God has done in the past, when you see what he has promised in the future, by faith you receive it as true in the present. It is a gift of God.

¹¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Daniel M. Doriani, and Philip Graham Ryken, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 22.

The second is **love**. Love is the ability to have patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control, and other virtues flow through you. It thinks first of others, not itself. This is what Christ showed to the man who was his opponent. This is what Paul now has for those who once persecuted and for those lost in the darkness of their own ignorance about themselves and the way out. It is a gift of God's grace.

A Trustworthy Saying

The center of our passage is the trustworthy saying. “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (15). This is not merely telling you what Paul thinks of himself before he was saved. Notice the *present* tense. **He is** (present active indicative) **the foremost of sinners**. He does not think this because he compares himself to other people, although given what he did, he could have easily done that and concluded that he was near the top. Rather, he is **comparing himself to God and to his Son Jesus**.

This is why it is a trustworthy saying. It isn't as if Timothy is to memorize this saying, “**Jesus Christ came into**

the world to save sinners, of whom *Paul* is the foremost.” No, when you memorize a saying, you don’t change words like that. This is a saying *for Timothy*. Timothy is supposed to be saying, “Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I (Timothy) am the foremost.” You are supposed to be saying it of yourself. Your pastor is supposed to be saying of himself. We are all supposed to be internalizing this truth. Our sin is hopelessly terrible and an infinite attack on the throne of God. It doesn’t matter if you are a blasphemer, a persecutor, or an openly insolent opponent of God. Or if you have gossiped about someone one time, told a lie to your parents, stolen a cookie from the cookie jar, hated, lusted, or coveted something in your heart. As James says, “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (Jas 2:10). If you don’t understand this, then you haven’t yet understood the holiness and purity of God and how any falling short is a violation on your part. That’s the point of the saying.

Mercy for God’s Glory

When you *internalize it*, then you can be thankful, and thankful to the right thing. Paul returns to his thankfulness,

by returning to the mercy of God *in Christ*. “But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (1Ti 1:16). He does this because there is now a second point he wants to add. Not only was God merciful to him when he was a sinner opposed to God, this mercy came to Paul so that God might be glorified in Christ Jesus.

This is the old doctrine *solī Deo gloria*—To God alone be the glory. Someone might ask, how could a just God freely pardon someone who is and continues to be a sinner? This was the question that plagued people like Pelagius and Charles Finney. Finney called such a thing, “impossible and absurd,” “false and nonsensical,” and “a different gospel.”¹² But this fails to understand the key point. *Jesus Christ*. Paul is thankful to Jesus because he has given him eternal life. How could Jesus do this?

It is because, first, *Jesus is Eternal* and he is *Life* itself. *He is God*. So, he has it within himself in a way no other does. Second, Jesus—as *an incarnated man*, both proved this fact and won life for himself in his resurrection. But why?

¹² Quoted in Michael Horton, “The Sola’s of the Reformation,” in *Here We Stand: A Call from Confessing Evangelicals*, ed. James M. Boice and Benjamin E. Sasse (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 124.

Because he did nothing wrong. He really was blameless. “Without sin,” as Hebrews says. Romans 1:4 says that he was, “declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead (Rom 1:4). The resurrection is the declaration to the entire world that the Son of God is Holy! So holy that its opposite, death (decay, rot, absence of life, etc.), cannot over power him. He is the Power.

But it is just here, in his holiness, that he can offer life to Paul or Timothy or me or you. He came to represent man, the same way the first Adam represented us. The first Adam fell and plunged the world into death. The second Adam obeyed, the law was upheld, justice was satisfied in the life and death of Jesus Christ. And so, God can be “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:25). This will become a major theme early in 1 Tim 2. This is its root.

But why would God do this? It is to glorify himself. Particularly, it is to glorify aspects of himself that would not otherwise be seen in this world and praised by living creatures. Those aspects are things like mercy, love, patience, grace (all things praised by Paul here). If all God did was *justly punish* everyone, then who would ever see these qualities and praise him for them? But God wanted to

display them to the whole world so that he might be seen to be *all* that he is. He would not hide this from his creation, because he is God, and he cannot do so.

This **patience** is a particularly wonderful attribute. It is said to be **perfect** patience. I have been patient in my life ... sometimes. Too much of the time, I am impatient. I get annoyed, edgy, exasperated, touchy. God isn't like this. He is not, in his infinite simplicity, affected by the stupidity of men. His patience is perfect. And that is good news for sinners who still breathe God's good air. It is good news for those having no knowledge of God and sin in ignorance. It is good news to those who have heard the good news and that kernel of truth is now working its way in their hearts, causing them to wonder and question. **He is patient with you.** It is good news to Christians who continue to sin, though they now hate it because it grieves the Holy Spirit. God does not stop being patient once you are a Christian. His patience is infinite, perfect in every way.

We have **talked here about salvation** and salvation along with the entrusting of the Gospel to Paul is what he uses here to counter the false teacher's **genealogies** and **myths** that supposedly proved their authority while taking people's eyes off Christ. Though he had the biological and religious

genealogical pedigree and could have used it to trump anyone's authority, Paul does not do this. Instead, he goes to the simple **call** of God upon his life. He goes to **faith** rather than works. He goes to **grace** and **mercy** rather than inherent self-goodness. He goes to effectual calling that brings dead people not seeking God at all to prove his authority. Paul is God's direct son through these things. Jesus is his brother. He needs no other genealogy than that! And when the Son of God called him upon that road and entrusted him with this eternal Gospel, no one and no thing could supersede that life-giving message that has changed hearts since the beginning of time, but has now been manifested so gloriously in Jesus.

To the King of the Ages

If, when you read this part of Scripture, you look at it and then **go away and forget** what it shows you about yourself, then **God help you**. You are in his hands, and you can no longer claim, like the Apostle, ignorance of the reality of your condition. He is the Judge, and you are leaving yourself in the hands of a Judge who cannot because of his own holiness show leniency apart from Christ.

If, when you hear this part of Scripture you **listen and perceive**, you take to heart the center of our text, that trustworthy saying and recognize that *I am the chief of sinners*, if you internalize this, that thought by itself should lead to great despair. But the Word does not leave you only at the center. That center is surrounded by such good news it is impossible to fully take it in. God is showing you mercy, even now. He is unfolding his grace, as you hear these very words, as he reveals this part of himself to you, as he shows you what Christ does for the chief of sinners who fall on their knees in despair and cry out, “**God be merciful to me a sinner.**”

And when you then look up and see that you have new eyes, that the scales have been taken off and you can truly see for the first time, there is nothing left to do but praise. “**To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever**” (17). This final doxology is the bookend of the first (vs. 12). In the first, he thanked **Christ Jesus our Lord**. In this, he thanks **the King of the ages**.

What’s so interesting to me is that Jesus is the King many times in Scripture. However, Paul is not giving praise to Jesus here (he has been doing that, obviously). No, he is

giving praise to **the Father**, or we might say he is giving praise to **the Triune God**. Either is acceptable. For he names “**God**.” And, he names two of those attributes that all men know through creation. He is **immortal**. He is Life itself. He has no beginning or ending. He is **invisible**. That is, God is spirit. He is not made up of composed material. But just because you can’t see him, it doesn’t mean he is not real or there. You have seen many reasons why he is there, today.

Honor him. Give him glory. Give him the worth he is due. It is due only to him. Confess that he is God. Thank him for your own salvation. Turn to him if you have no yet done so and see his superabounding mercy and grace.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Praise him all creatures here below.

Praise him above you heavenly host.

Praise the Father, praise the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Amen.

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