

SERMON TITLE: "Saved by Grace: A Sinner Transformed"  
SERMON TEXT: 1 Timothy 1:12-17  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: September 24, 2017, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

I've been thinking a lot about history lately. Like many of you, I've been watching the PBS series on the Viet Nam War. I've also been reading a biography of Martin Luther, since this fall is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Luther's posting of his *95 Theses* on the door of the Catholic church in Wittenberg, Germany. Earlier this year, I also started reading a thick biography of Francis Asbury, the circuit riding preacher and bishop of the early American Methodists.

Luther and Asbury are interesting comparisons. While Luther lived mostly in the 1500s, Asbury lived mostly in the 1700s. While Luther lived in Germany all his life, Asbury started out in England and then came to America when he was 26 years old. Even though Luther began his adult career as a celibate Roman Catholic priest, he eventually got married and lived happily that way. Francis Asbury, on the other hand, started in the Anglican tradition in which clergy were allowed to get married. Yet, Asbury never permitted romance to get in the way of his single-minded mission, and he did everything in his power to dissuade his young circuit riding preachers from settling down with a wife and family.

It's also interesting to compare the two men's theology. Martin Luther was primarily concerned that the Roman Catholic Church had made salvation too hard and complicated. The adoration of the saints that had originated as a blessing had become burdensome and expensive, and put salvation out of reach of many. So Luther's teaching and reforms allowed people more freedom to bypass some of the cumbersome structures of the church and to have a much-more direct, faith and grace-based relationship with Jesus Christ.

Francis Asbury agreed with Luther that people could and should have a direct relationship with Jesus. Asbury's preaching was all about the grace that made that possible. But Asbury also worked his

whole life to connect people, communities, and churches throughout the 13 colonies and the American frontier. The creation and early success of the Methodist Church in America was largely a result of Asbury's tireless efforts to advance the organization and structure of the Methodist connection. Asbury devoted himself to this cause because he believed that the Methodist connection had the power to deliver the gracious salvation of Jesus Christ to the people wherever they were.

The gospel of salvation through grace and faith in Jesus Christ didn't only belong to Protestant reformers and early Methodists, however. That was also the original message of the earliest Christians and New Testament writers. In this great historical tradition of Christian faith, I invite you to consider with me First Timothy chapter one. Let's see what we can learn as we read about the Apostle Paul, a sinner transformed.

### **1—CHRIST CAME TO SAVE SINNERS**

The key to this passage is verse 15, where we see, first of all, that we are saved by grace because Christ Jesus came into the world to save *sinners*. God didn't send his only begotten son into the world to die on a cross to save people who were already doing everything perfectly well. God sent his son to help those who were having trouble, getting in trouble, and causing trouble. In great part, our salvation comes because Jesus was willing to lower himself to come among us and see what we're really like. He was willing to interact with us in our real-world, real-life problems. Jesus was willing to come to us where we are.

Have you ever heard of someone (usually a woman) who hired a housekeeper, but then felt like she had to clean up her house before the housekeeper came, so the housekeeper wouldn't see what a mess it was? Some people are like that with Jesus. They think that they can't engage with Jesus or the church until after they've already fixed up their life. They think they have to work hard and do enough good things before they can allow Jesus into their heart.

But that's not the way of salvation by grace. Salvation by grace happens when Jesus sees our sin and loves us anyway. Actually, we're fooling ourselves if we think that we can hide our sin from Jesus. We may be blind, but Jesus isn't. It's like the story of the man who jumped up at a church prayer meeting and shouted, "Brothers and sisters, I've been a miserable and contemptible sinner for years and never knew it before tonight." Immediately another church member shut him up by saying, "Sit down, Brother. The rest of us have known it for a long time."\* We may be out of touch with what we're doing wrong, but Christ sees clearly what we've been up to.

Paul was grateful for Christ's mercy because it was offered to him *even though* he was a blasphemer and a persecutor. Christ's mercy came to him, even though he was violent and acted in ignorance and unbelief. Christ's mercy didn't come to Paul because he'd already straightened out his life. Christ's mercy came precisely because Paul's life was so obviously in need of repair.

Now, some of you who have read the Bible a bit might be thinking, surely Paul couldn't have been that bad. After all, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote that he had followed all the Jewish laws to the letter. He said if anyone had reason to be confident in their righteousness and zeal for the faith, he had even more reason to be sure.<sup>P 3:4-6</sup>

Yet Paul threw all that self-righteousness out the window when he was encountered by Christ on the Road to Damascus. Paul realized that what he had considered perfect, or near perfect, behavior was actually not all that good. Paul recognized that, in his zeal to follow the Jewish law, he had been ignoring the grace of God. Paul had blasphemed God, or disrespected God, when Paul limited God to a legalistic set of rules. In his judgmental zeal, Paul had wrongly and sinfully denied God's mercy—causing spiritual and physical harm and even death.

Even though Paul was highly educated in a certain Jewish tradition, he was missing an important piece of who God was. You could say that Paul's idea of "right" was quite a big "wrong." In his enthusiasm to promote the Jewish law, Paul had persecuted those who followed Christ. Paul had been

ruthless in his determination to enforce obedience to the Jewish code. At Paul's hand and with his approval, Christians were imprisoned and even stoned to death. Even though Paul thought he was in the right, Christ could see the sinfulness of his ways.

The irony of human life is that whether our motives are evil or we're trying really hard to do what's good, we still manage to sin against God and our neighbor. We all need to be saved by grace because we're all sinners. So, the good news is that Jesus came into the world to save *sinners*.

## **2—CHRIST CAME TO TRANSFORM SINNERS**

As a second point of what Paul was writing to Timothy, we could just repeat the same sentence with a slightly different emphasis: Christ Jesus came into the world to *save* sinners. To help us get the meaning of that emphasis, I'm going to paraphrase: Christ came to *transform* sinners.

Again, Paul speaks from his own experience when he says, "The grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." In his patience and mercy, Christ had transformed Paul's life. The person who formerly was a blasphemer, persecutor, and man of violence was changed into a positive example for others. Through the mercy of Christ, Paul became the number one missionary of the early church, as he helped others believe in Christ for forgiveness and eternal life.

This gracious saving change that Jesus works in a person's life isn't just a change of status or label. And it isn't just taking away a punishment. It's a real transformation of attitude and behavior.

Imagine Paul for a minute. Before he was encountered by Christ on the Road to Damascus, he was described in Acts 8:3 as one who "ravaged the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, committing them to prison." Acts 9:1 tells us that he was "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord."

Now contrast that with how Paul was later, as a missionary leader of the church, writing to the Christians at Philippi these words: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and

if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”<sup>P 4:8</sup> Contrast the early Paul with these words he wrote to the Christians in Galatia: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control . . . If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.”<sup>G 5:22-25</sup>

God’s mercy and grace are powerful change agents. Sometimes we forget just how powerful. In contrast to muscle and weaponry, in contrast to judgment and punishment, we tend to think of grace as 80-pound weakling. But that’s wrong. Mercy isn’t the absence of strength. Grace isn’t the lack of fortitude or determination. Mercy is the willful and intentional choice to forgive a person’s sins and give that person another chance. The grace of Christ is the initiative of God in our lives, which comes to us in the world, where we are, and lifts us up out of trouble and sets us down where we can find freedom and opportunity to become new creations in Christ, redeemed and made holy through God’s love.

The grace of Christ gives us not only hope for eternity, but also hope for the life we live now. We don’t have to wait for heaven to find peace and holiness. We can be happier and live more abundantly today, if we choose. The mercy of Christ teaches us that our failings aren’t the end of the story. As long as there’s another day, another hour, or even another minute, we have the chance to start over again. Whether our sinning has been against God, against people, or both, Christ is ready to give us an attitude and behavior adjustment. Christ is ready to *save* us. All we have to do is accept his offer and he will begin his work to transform the sinner.

### **CONCLUSION**

In my reading this week, I discovered that 1 Timothy 1:15 was Francis Asbury’s favorite Bible verse. Over and over again, he preached on this text--and especially at Christmas. Why did God send baby Jesus into the world? To save sinners. The Protestant, Methodist, and Christian good news is that, like the Apostle Paul, saved by grace, we can be a sinner transformed.

\*Adapted from Hoover Rupert, *Why Didn’t Noah Swat Both Mosquitoes?* (CSS Publishing Co., Lima, OH: 1994), p. 84.