

Sinner of the Year

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[0 : 00] Thanks so much, Corey. Folks, let me encourage you to have that passage in 1 Timothy open in front of you. And I wonder how you come to church this morning. I wonder how you're doing, how your last week has been.

However you answer that question, I want you to know that we are turning to one of the most precious passages in all of Scripture. And maybe you're here today and you're burdened. Maybe you're here today and you're weary.

Maybe physically, maybe spiritually, maybe emotionally. Maybe you're at a loss in life. Maybe each day seems repetitive and you wonder what is the point in getting up each day and doing the same, same thing.

We love to think we're creative individuals, but how often are our lives just one cycle of the same day after the same day after the same day? Maybe you're here and you're struggling to carry on. Well, whoever you are here today, friends, we will find wonderful strength for the Christian life in the central message of this passage.

[1 : 10] So let me encourage you just to tune in for the next 25 minutes or so. And let's just feast on what this passage is telling us. Now, here's a little game that we play with our kids.

It's called You're an Expert. So what we do is we award each other the title of being the best at something. Right?

So in our family, we've got an expert tree climber. We've got an expert hungry hippos player. We've got an expert junior monopoly player. There's an expert for the monkey bars.

There's an expert for scooting. There's an expert for hide and seek. There's an expert for making hot chocolate. It's a mystery where they get their competitive side from, I tell you. But we love being the best.

Do we not? We love being the best. And we live in a culture that loves to be the best. I mean, just think of the cycle that we see every year in our world.

[2 : 07] We have the home of the year. What was that program? Scotland's home of the year. Right? We have Michelin stars that are awarded for best restaurants. We have the apprentice winner.

We have the Ballon d'Or. We have the Sunday Times Rich List. We have the Times Magazine Person of the Year. We love to celebrate being the best. And as a result, how often, friends, do we live our lives carrying around with us that nagging sense, that paralyzing sense of looking at our own lives and living our lives in the world and feeling like we never quite measure up?

Maybe even you've walked into church here today. And we bring into here that same mindset, don't we? Maybe in our walk with Jesus, we just feel like we never measure up to what a Christian is supposed to be.

We walk in here today and we look around and we think, if only people knew. Well, friends, I take it for all of us here today that the heart of this passage in the world that we live, the heart of it contains a refreshing surprise.

Because it's the confession, the story, the testimony of a man who freely admits to being the worst. And somehow, he freely puts that on the table in this passage.

[3 : 38] And he's saying, fully owning the fact, that reality about himself. And he's saying that that's where I find life. And with that alone, I'm sitting up and taking notice as one wants to know how that works.

Paul says, I am the worst. Now, let's not divorce this passage from its context. That would be the easy thing to do here. Remember what we saw last week.

Paul is urging this young man called Timothy, his protege, his church planting buddy, his pal who he's left in this city of Ephesus to get this church back on track.

That was our big idea last week. Back doing the thing that they're supposed to be doing as a local church, which is being a pillar that holds up God's truth for the watching world to see.

So that is our job description as a local church. The church of the living God. He lives in the hearts of his people. The pillar and the foundation of the truth. Which means if the people of the world want to know where to find truth, friends, they should be looking to the local church.

[4 : 44] Why? Because the local church is holding up God's truth. That's the logic. And last week we saw Paul say to Timothy, verse 3, if you want to track with me, chapter 1, that you've got to stand up to those in the church who are teaching nonsense.

Teaching things that kind of go right against the grain of the gospel that I passed on to you, particularly in what they're teaching about how we relate to the Old Testament law. So some in this church are saying that, are viewing the law, the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments, and they're using it as a barometer to measure how good they are.

So what he thought about was likely the case in terms of the opening section of this passage, that because we don't do certain things, the certain things that are perhaps listed here, that we are somehow superior to the people out there who perhaps are.

What did Paul say? He said the law is good. You see that? The law is good. But if you really let God's word by his spirit search your heart, be the double-edged sword.

I always love that reference in Hebrews. It doesn't sound pretty to me. Double-edged sword right in the heart. If you let it expose your failures, as we measure ourselves against our holy God and who he is and his standards, how can any of us stand?

[6 : 10] The point, I think, is that the law is not some kind of moral pole to be claimed that we can reach God. It exposes our sin, and it exposes our deep need to be rescued from ourselves.

And it should lead us to look to the one who kept the law, to Jesus, as the one who offers to rescue us. A rescuer.

And if you're still not 100% convinced in that, Timothy, let me remind you of my story, because Paul's life here is case in point of how the grace of Jesus works.

Now, last week, if you remember, we went for a one, two, three sermon outline. This week, we're going to go for a three, two, one. So let's just work our way through the passage with that structure. Picking up at verse 12. Do you see how Paul, there's three things that Paul knows he was? Picking up at verse 12. So here's the man who grew up as a top of the class Jew.

[7 : 10] Right? He's got impeccable credentials. He comes from the right family. He's studied under an impressive teacher. His behavior is brilliant.

He holds the right beliefs. I mean, if you want to talk about it in our language, this guy holds the equivalent of a religious royal flush. He ain't beating him. Right? He is your poster boy Jew.

I mean, how many of us grew up with a poster of the person we wanted to be like on our wall?

Yeah, maybe it would. I don't know whether it was just me. I don't know. A football player, a singer, an astronaut.

What it is that you aspire to be? If you're a Jewish boy growing up, understand that Paul's on your wall. He's the guy. He's the best in the business.

He's the best in the game. But you see how he looks back and he reflects on three things that he was. What does he say? Verse 13. And they come really quick.

[8 : 06] He was a blasphemer. So he cursed the name of Jesus. Interesting there, he's tying divinity to Jesus. Blasphemy against the name of the Lord.

Well, he's tying it right to Jesus. This is who Jesus is. He spat at the very mention of his name. He was a blasphemer. And he was a persecutor. This is the man who went to the hassle of obtaining a warrant in order that he could arrest these early disciples of Jesus.

And he was fully prepared to travel all the way from Jerusalem to Damascus, which is a six-day journey. That is 135 miles.

Arrest the Christians and drag them all the way back. So it's a return trip all the way back to Jerusalem, presumably so he could humiliate them in front of his home crowds.

That's what he wanted to do. That was his life's mission. If you're going to travel that amount of distance, something's really got to have you, hasn't it? And this is what had Paul. He flat out rejected and wanted to crush this Jesus stuff as a movement.

[9 : 13] And it wasn't like he hadn't heard of Jesus. Nor that he didn't understand what Jesus was claiming. This stuff, just what Jesus was saying was just running right against the grain of Paul's way of thinking, his way of life.

And I take it, see if Paul, as Paul looks back on the list of sins that come in chapter one there just before. I take it when he writes murder. He knows that he's writing as one who's got blood in his hands.

In Acts 9, Luke describes him as one who's breathing threats. I don't even know how that works. Breathing threats and murder against the disciples. If ever there was a guy who was legible for the angry emoji, it's this guy Paul.

And here's the point, I think. Paul wasn't just an unlikely convert to Jesus. I think it's way more than that. I think this is the guy that if we were writing the script, we were writing the story, we would have thought Jesus should have just silenced Paul and taken him out of the game.

He was just getting in the way. But that's not how Jesus works. You see, Paul encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus as he's going there to arrest the Christians.

[10 : 36] And he encounters the living Jesus and he sees the utter folly of his ways. And I love in that section in Acts 9, Jesus says, why are you persecuting me?

And Paul's saying, I'm not persecuting you. You're not physically here. It's how closely Jesus identifies himself with his people. You persecute my people.

You're persecuting me. That's how tightly I am bound to them. And Jesus gives Paul, doesn't just forgive it. He transforms his life. And he gives him a new purpose in life.

And that's a wonderful truth about what Jesus does. We're going to come back to that in just a few moments time. There's three things. Do you see, three things that Paul knows he was. And that leads him to reflect on two things that he knows he's received.

Do you see them, two of them here? Firstly, he's received the mercy. Do you see how twice in these verses Paul uses that phrase, I was shown mercy. We get it at 13, we get it at 16.

[11 : 34] It's almost as if he can't get his head around the fact that that's true. That Jesus would show mercy to someone like him. It's the repeated refrain of God's people down the ages.

You get this all the time in the Psalms. And you can go home and read Psalm 103 after this if you want. That he does not treat us like our sins deserve. That God's loving kindness, his gentleness, that the loving mercy and the kindness of our God.

Friends, we should never get over mercy. That Jesus would treat us like this. He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. I was shown mercy.

And second, the grace of Jesus overflowed for me. See verse 14. He didn't just not treat me as I deserved.

He treated me exceedingly better. He loved me. He loved me. And he poured out his grace on me abundantly.

[12 : 42] Now what an image that is, right? This is not some kind of dripping tap. You ever been in one of those flats you just moved in and it's literally a drip? That was our first flat when we got married. It's ain't a dripping tap.

This is Niagara Falls. This is one of those chocolate fondue fountains you get at a wedding that just keeps on going. This is what Paul is saying that the grace of God is done for him. The grace of Jesus has been poured out abundantly on me.

In the old hymn, I know not how God's wondrous grace to me is daily shown, nor why with mercy Christ in love redeemed me for his own. There's a sense in which we just don't understand.

We don't deserve this. We don't understand if this works and yet it's true in Jesus. He's poured out abundantly his grace upon us. And so, Timothy, here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance.

I think I just mean sit up and take notice of this. If you've got one thing you're going to, I don't know, wouldn't have had highlighters or anything like that in this day, but that's highlight this. Get this. Base your life on this.

[13 : 46] That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst. And there's his confession. And I take it that's not false humility. That's not him kind of pretending to be the worst to make everyone else feel better.

That is just Paul recognising. Remember this guy who's grown up a Jew who understands the holiness of God, who understands the anger, the wrath of God against the sin of rebels, human

beings.

He gets it and he knows it should have fallen on him. And he knows the mercy which Christ has shown him. And so he says, I am the worst. I've received, I've been shown mercy.

I've received abundant grace. And so from two things he knows he's received, for instance, one thing he knows it means. And do you see how he calls it the very reason I was shown mercy?

In other words, here's the purpose. Here's what was behind it. So that in me, the worst of sinners, and again he repeats it, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

[14:58] Now I take it to all those who are watching in and listening to his life story, and that's what we're doing 2,000 odd years later. What does Paul see himself as? He sees himself as an example of just how patient Jesus is with rebels.

And friends, are you not so glad that Jesus is like that? Right? Do you know the line I heard myself using the other night? Came out with the line, you're skating on thin ice.

And have you ever used that one? Right? Skating on thin ice. Right? Speaking to... You know what ice is. Right? I don't know how they're supposed to get that, but I'm trying to keep a straight face.

Well, in the back of the mind, I'm saying to myself, check you out using your classic parent line.

Great going. But it's what we say, isn't it? You are skating on thin ice. My patience is wearing thin.

What do we talk about? The straw that broke the camel's back. There's a limit. But... Friends, take it in that Jesus is not just a better version of us.

[16:09] That he is not just like a souped up human being. He's not just like us in our best days. Friends, he is so patient with us.

We have given him, have we not, countless reasons to jump ship. We have given him numerous opportunities to bail. We have given him ample time to cut his losses and get out now.

And yet we need to know that none of those things have changed his mind about us. This is who he is. And if you're a Christian here today, this is not about the strength of our faith.

This is about the strength of Jesus' love for us and his grip on us. The God who knew us before we were in our mummy's wombs.

The God who decided in eternity past to save us. The God who sent his son at a particular moment in history to come and die the death that we should have died.

[17:20] The God who has sent his spirit to live in us. Friends, he will see the job home. And he's never giving up on us.

All the immense patience of Jesus. And make no mistake, he will bring us home.

Presumably that is why John Newton, all those years ago, we sang it earlier, penned those lyrics.

Through many dangers, toils and snares, we have already come. 'Twas grace that brought us safe thus far.

And grace will lead us home. That's what he's reflecting on. This is Jesus. You see, Paul's life testifies to the patient, pursuing and passionate love of Jesus for his people.

And I take it that is why next week, and Alistair will come and lead us through the first bit of chapter 2 next week. Paul is going to say that God desires all people to be saved.

[18:24] Do you see that in chapter 2? And I take it that's why we need to get praying for all sorts of people. That is the call in chapter 2. I don't want to verse creep. But I take it this church have stopped praying for people.

Stop praying for their world. That's why it's such an important part of what we do on a Sunday. I take it this leads right into the fact that I'm an example of God's pursuing grace. And that's why you need to pray for the peoples of the world.

Because this is the heart of our triune God, our three-in-one God. Because he can give life to even the most spiritual dead of hearts. Friends, let me just ask you, think about it.

What hope is there for the pub crawl leader in your halls right now? What is the hope for the banter setter in your work?

What is the hope for the hard as nails right back on your football team? Right? What is the hope for your neighbor who seems to have life sweet?

[19:26] What is the hope for the high-profile atheist who takes to Twitter to mock the things of God? What is the hope? Why keep going?

Why not just bail out now? Why keep witnessing for Jesus when it feels like he isn't even on people's radar? Answer? That Jesus is like this.

And that's what drives mission. It's not our ability to put on a show. Friends, we will never out-cool the world. What do we have to offer the world other than this Jesus?

That he's like this. And do you see how Jesus didn't just save Paul and kind of let him free to roam in the hills like some kind of wild horse?

Do you see how he saved him? And he gave him a job to do. He's reflecting on that in verse 12.

And verse 13. He appointed me to his service. Right? Can you get that? He appointed me.

[20 : 26] That Jesus is in the business of transforming lives and setting people off to serve for him. Let me just say that. If that's you today, if you're a Christian, know that that's the same. We might not be an apostle.

But we certainly have a job to do that Jesus has given us in terms of witnessing to him, playing our part in what God is doing. He appointed me to his service.

And do you know what, Timothy? Know that he's appointed you to the job in Ephesus as well.

Right? It wasn't me that appointed you. It wasn't primarily those who prophesied over you.

You see that there? I take it that just means they confirmed your giftedness and heart for this role. It wasn't just them. It wasn't just the elders who later on will read about how they laid their hands on you to set you off.

It wasn't them who primarily appointed you. Know that it was Jesus himself who set you apart for this role. Of dealing with people like Hymenaeus and Alexander who presumably are hearing everything that Paul is saying and they're concluding it's nonsense, that they're probably the ones teaching falsely.

[21 : 30] And I take it that they've been asked to leave the church in the expectation that they see the error of their ways and that they come back. And I guess it's what's an early form of church discipline that's going on there. But what's going to keep you going in that battle, Timothy?

What is going to keep you going when it's hard? What is going to keep you going? What's going to keep us going, friends, when every day feels the same? What's going to keep us going, witnessing for Jesus in a world that doesn't seem interested often?

What's going to keep you going is what he says at verse 12. It's the strength that's available in the grace of Jesus.

And I was thinking this week, what's the point in all this? Right, you take these verses here. What's the point? I mean, it's not like Timothy doesn't know this. Right, it's not as if he reads this and thought, Paul, I've only had known.

You didn't tell me you were like that in a previous life. I thought you were a squeaky clean guy. He reads this. What's the point? Why rehash this? It's a convincing argument for how grace works.

[22 : 33] Absolutely. Is it to keep him going, praying for people, the unlikely? Absolutely. But I think later on at verse 6 of chapter 4, we get a wee clue. Paul tells him, verse 6 of chapter 4, to be nourished on the truths of the faith.

See it, verse 6, chapter 4, be nourished on the truths of the faith. Love that word, nourished. How much care, friends, do we take in nourishing our own bodies? Think of it.

Right? Vitamin tablets, healthy drinks, superfoods. It's why everyone's eating. What are they eating now? Avocados. You get them everywhere. They don't even know how to spell avocado, let alone nobody was 10 years ago.

But we nourish our bodies, don't we? We nourish our bodies because we want to see ourselves grow. Getting the right stuff into our systems matters. And do you see how 2,000 years ago, Paul was telling Timothy to nourish himself spiritually on the foundational truths of the Christian faith, which I take it is salvation through grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone.

In other words, the grace of Jesus. That's what's going to help you keep going. That's what's going to nourish you in the Christian walk. The grace of Jesus. The grace of Jesus. Being galvanized by his love for us.

[23 : 53] The sense of wonder at who he is. Friends, let me ask you. When was the last time you just spent time with Jesus? In the Gospels and just enjoyed who he is?

You know, the more you read of Paul, you get the sense that he never gets over the grace of God. Just never gets over it. Friends, do you need to bask in that truth today?

Here's a thought. Friends, we did not turn up here today in order for Jesus to grade us. How many of us have walked in here today thinking to ourselves, I wonder if God is disappointed with me.

Now make no mistake, this letter is a huge call to holiness as we try to reflect our holy God, the way that he calls us to live. Absolutely. But friends, know that it's based on grace.

How many of us walked in here today and subconsciously thought that we were here to be graded? And yet, friends, the reason that we meet today, the reason that we meet every Sunday is to be strengthened by the grace that is found in Jesus.

[25 : 05] And that's why it's a safe place here to take off your mask. Maybe not physically, but spiritually, right? Because if your identity is in who Jesus is, if you're resting in his grace and his love for you, that there's nothing we did to be saved.

There's nothing we did for Jesus to love us. That he saves us, that he holds us. Friends, what's the point in play acting at it? Because that robs him of glory. Jesus is full of grace.

And do you know what? He is more full of grace than we are of sin. And this is who he is today. You know, the false teachers, I take it in the background, what are they teaching?

What they're teaching is leading to envy, division and pride in this church. That's what you see later on. And yet Paul's gospel of Jesus crucified in our place for our sin, that our lives by faith are caught up in his.

And you need to know that today, that that is your identity as a Christian. You are in Christ and his righteousness is ours. That gospel leads to joy, peace and thanksgiving.

[26 : 14] And life. And friends, grace, let me just say, is the rocket fuel which should propel us into a life of godliness. Are you resting in the grace of Jesus today?

You know, just as we close, you know, one of the biggest shows on TV when I was growing up was Friends. And some of you may have watched the reunion they did recently. I don't know if any of you watched that.

I watched a little bit of it with Alex. But let me just tell you one thing that I found fascinating about it. And it was a reflection from Matthew Perry, who was the guy who played Chandler, if you remember the show.

And Chandler was arguably the funniest actor around at the time, right? Good looking guy, funny sense of humour. And he's the guy in the show who always seemed to get the great lines.

So Matthew Perry starts opening up in this reunion about his struggles. And none of the other actors knew anything about it. And this is what he said. It's on the screen. And he talks about how when they used to film in front of live audiences.

[27 : 17] And if he made a joke and the audience didn't laugh, this is what he said. It felt like it was going to kill him inside. Because he needed the laughs of the people.

He needed their affirmation. He needed their love to affirm and maintain his persona. And no wonder the guy, if you picture it, no wonder the guy looks shattered.

Because isn't that not an exhausting way to live your life? And yet I wonder how many of us can relate somewhat to what he's saying. Is it not true, friends, that you and I, maybe even subconsciously, so often can live our lives for the praise and the approval of other people?

Maybe you're here today and your parents have really high expectations for you at university. Now, don't get me wrong. Let's excel in everything that we do. But friends, are those expectations crushing you?

Maybe you're here and it's school grades. Expectations for your children, for your classmates, from your neighbours, from your peer group, from your friendship circles. All these expectations, things that we feel we need to live up to.

[28 : 30] And dare I say, even sometimes when we come together as a church family. You know, I've never met a person who I thought was more impressive in person than they came across on their Facebook profile.

And that says a lot more about my sinful heart than it does about anything else. But is that not true? Is that not the world in which we live? That we like to project that we are the best? But see, friends, when we know the God, we pray to him today as our Father.

Let's never take our eyes off that wonderful truth. And when we know that our Father is the God of verse 17, the eternal one, the immortal one, the invisible one, the one who's so far above the things of this earth.

And we take in the fact that he is that God, that he is the holy God, and yet in Jesus, he is for me, and he loves me, and he loves me on my best days, and he loves me on my worst days.

Friends, what an incredible place to live your life. The transforming grace of Jesus Christ. And do some of us need to rest in that wonderful truth today?

[29 : 50] Here's what we're going to do just as we close. We're just going to have a moment of silence. And friends, I urge you today to take in who Jesus is, and then we'll pray, and we'll stand to sing our last songs.

Why don't we just be quiet and let's still our hearts before this Jesus today? And friends, maybe even for the first time today, I take it as God's Spirit has been moving amongst us.

If you're not here today and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, as we've looked at everything that Paul's life is, as we've thought about the seriousness of our sin, and if you've thought about the grace of Jesus, who he is, maybe right now is the time that you want to put your faith in him, and just pray, Lord Jesus, help me know who you are.

And so, Father, I pray for all of us here today, Lord, that our souls would be furnished by the grace of Jesus Christ.

Father, help us take in the glory of who he is and what he's done for us. And we just thank you so much, Lord, for the grace that's been poured out abundantly on us.

[31 : 12] And I maybe just pray particularly for those here today who are struggling in the fight and who are weary and wondering if they can carry on. Lord, we'd have fresh appreciation of who they are in Jesus.

And the fact that you are their Father and you're for them. Lord, may that come home with crystal clarity in a wonderful way today.

Father, we just praise you that you love us. And we just thank you, Lord, that you're the God of all grace. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.