

Jesus Came to Save the Foremost Sinners 1 Timothy 1:12-17

There was a scholarly study done years ago entitled, "Lying in Everyday Life." It was conducted by a group of scholars at the University of Virginia, Texas A&M University and Pfeiffer College, and it showed that adults lied about two times a day. For some here in this room, that's probably hard to believe. In a Reader's Digest poll in 2004, 96% of respondents admitted to lying and other dishonest acts. Is that concerning to you?

Yet, as I think about this, I would say that probably everyone in this room lies (or, is at least dishonest) every day of their lives, in one specific way: when asked how you're doing. I'm the type of person that when I ask you how you're doing, I really want you to answer honestly. And, I have a general rule of thumb. If someone responds with something less than good, I'll ask more. So, if they say, "I'm ok," I'll say, "Just ok?" That's taken people by surprise before. One time I had a person say, "Oh, I didn't think you really wanted to know how I was doing." And, that's understandable because we say, "How are you" more like a formality than like something we really mean.

But I wonder how much we really prefer to not open ourselves up to other people. For example, how do you view yourself within a church family? Will you allow yourself to be noticed? Or, are you the person who wants to present yourself a certain way so people think you're fine and good? Or, maybe you're on the other extreme. You want to share all your problems with others, but in doing so, you're really wanting the attention and focus on you. In all of these types of responses, the emphasis is on you and protecting *you*. And, this type of deception is not healthy for the church, nor does it speak well to the world around us.

I've had people share with me before that the church is just a bunch of hypocrites. Have you ever heard that? People dress up, go to church, sing songs, leave and do their sinful things. Other people have said to me that the church is filled with people who are better than others, so they can't really relate to the real world. I wonder if one of the reasons why people have these accusations is because professing Christians like to put on their masks. We'll say that the church is a hospital for sick saints, but we present ourselves as though it's a country club for perfect people. We love other people being vulnerable, but we don't want to be.

So, we wait for others, all the while we present ourselves as "fine." But, did you know that the message of Christmas confronts this deception? The message of Christmas summons us to take off our masks. Only when we do this will we really be able to glory in God and grow in pursuing Jesus. We'll see this in the text we're studying today from 1 Timothy.

If you recall, the last two sermons have focused on passages that state *why* Jesus came to this world. We're focusing on these passages because "Advent" refers to Jesus coming. He was on mission. So, we saw the first week that he came to save sinners, and last week, we were reminded that he came to save *individual* sinners, like Zaccheus. Today, we're going to look at 1 Timothy 1 and discover that God came to save the foremost sinners, like Paul. So, if you haven't turned in your Bible already to this passage, please do so. I'll read it after I pray [Dolores Kleinheksel; First Baptist Zeeland; Dennis & Jan Horn].

I'm going to start reading in verse 12 and through verse 17:

*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

The letter of 1 Timothy was written in order to help a young pastor in the church at Ephesus. Within this context at Ephesus, Paul is concerned about false teachers creeping in. In verse 6, he writes, “⁶ Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, ⁷ desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.”² People can have a lot of knowledge. They’re puffed up. They think they know, but they don’t know the truth. So, Paul starts off this letter by reminding Timothy of the message of Jesus and how it ought to shape us. In particular, Paul talks about himself a little bit. He does this in order to show the contrast between him and the false teachers. What we see of false teachers is that they **Focus on appearances and embrace a false gospel. Therefore, the emphasis is on “self.”** But a true teacher of the gospel is **transparent with one’s sinfulness and embraces the true gospel. Therefore, the emphasis is on Jesus.**

All of this comes to help Timothy with his local church. And, Paul serves as an example to every reader, helping them to understand how the gospel of Jesus ought to shape us in our daily lives. Now, you could say, “What does this have to do with Christmas and Advent?” Well, did you notice verse 15? “Christ Jesus came into the world. . .” This is a verse about Jesus’ mission, his advent, his coming into this world. Therefore, these verses give us a reason for why Jesus came in human flesh as a baby – living in this world. The big idea I want to emphasize today is that **Jesus came to save the foremost sinners.** The word “foremost” is emphasized twice in this text, and therefore is something Paul wants us to notice. What we see Paul doing here in this text is show us that when we boast in our weaknesses and sins, Christ is glorified! And Jesus came so that we would live this way. Therefore, I can legitimately say that Christmas confronts our desire to put on the mask, build up walls, hide our real selves, “just always say we’re ‘fine.’” And, in reality, we’re going to see that Paul isn’t just saying *he’s* the foremost sinner, but I believe he’s saying we all are.

What’s amazing, though, is that doesn’t lead Paul to despair. Instead, verse 17 shows that **Paul’s knowledge of his sinfulness, in light of Jesus’ purpose of coming, leads him to worship God more fully!** This is what Paul wants for Timothy and for Ephesus. And, this is what God wants for us as well. If you recall Jesus’ own words that he came to call the sick, not the well, you realize that you will not experience greater growth in godliness if you pretend you’re well. Only those who confess their sins will actually grow.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Ti 1:12–17.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Ti 1:6–7.

So, this morning, I want to help encourage each of us to pull the masks off and experience more of the salvation Jesus came to bring. There are three points I want to bring across that will hopefully help you to take the mask off. First, recognize that Jesus came to expose your sin. Second, rest in the fact that Jesus came to give overflowing grace. Third, Jesus came to display *his* glory (not our glory) through us. Let's now start with the first point:

1. Jesus came to expose your sin (vv. 13, 15).

There are many people who tend to think that Christianity is just about being "ok." If I don't have major issues in my life, I go to church, sing songs, listen to a sermon, try to apply it to my life. But, if I get into trouble, I'll take care of it because I should be able to do that on my own.

That doesn't mesh with the gospel message. Look over at the cross, and recall the illustration Paul gives in Colossians. The central message of Christianity is that Jesus became our sin list: blasphemy, lust, anger, pride, self-righteousness, lying, theft – and so much more. Part of the central message of Christianity is that we are sinners. We don't merely sin, but that we are sinful to the core! We don't want to give God the glory and therefore, our sins are manifested in various ways amongst different people.

This is what we don't want to admit. Beginning with Adam and Eve. They hid from God, and we try to hide from God as well. When Jesus came into the world as the light, we're told that the darkness didn't comprehend him. And we know that Jesus was hated by many because he exposed their sin. The reality is still true today. Jesus came to expose *your* sin. Not just sin in general, but *your* sin. And if you resist that, you're resisting one of Jesus' intentions for coming. Re-read verse 15 with me: 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.³

Not only this, but look at what Paul writes in verse 13. He summarizes his life before coming to faith in Jesus: though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. . . .⁴ Paul, at the beginning of the letter, states who he was. The term for blasphemy refers to denying God through treating God carelessly or disrespectfully. This probably refers to how Paul treated Jesus and was hostile towards Jesus' followers. He was a blasphemer. He also was a persecutor, which stemmed from his blasphemy. Christians feared Paul because he was so zealous to extinguish Christianity. And, Paul was an "insolent opponent." This phrase was used quite a bit in the Greek Old Testament as well as in the Roman culture. It was a basic description of people who were considered uncivilized in their behavior. Maybe like how people in the past might have referred to Native Americans as *savages*.

Paul, who was an elite Jew – a Pharisee of Pharisees – a man whose mask was practically made of gold said that under his mask was utter sinfulness. Jesus' presence into the world exposed him. And Paul agrees with this. This is a contrast with the false teachers that Paul is concerned about. The false teachers don't emphasize their past sinfulness (or, present). Instead, they seem to speak on their glories and good. What type of person are you? Do you boast in your weakness or do you boast in your apparent strength?

Some of you might agree with this, but you keep the mask half-on. Or, some hear Paul's words here and say, "Well, Paul's sins were open for the whole world! So, it wasn't hard for him to mention it." Really? I was thinking this past week that we know the ugly of many people who we consider heroes of the faith in

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Ti 1:15.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Ti 1:13.

the Bible. We know Abraham. We know Elijah's hopeless complaint. We know what Moses did. We definitely know what David did. What about Gideon? Why do we know these things about them? Because God told us. And Paul's story is known to us because God has decided to tell us. So, tell me, is God's intention to hide your sin or to expose it? The answer is "to expose it."

So, think again about verse 15. Paul says that there's good news in this. Jesus came into this world to *save sinners*. Hey! Ventura! If you know your sinfulness. If you admit and agree with God about your sinfulness, you are a candidate for the very purpose Jesus came into the world. He came to *save sinners*. But you could say, "Yeah but, there's this sin or that sin. Or, there's this thing in my past." Or, you could say, "But Paul wasn't as bad because he says he did it ignorantly in unbelief. This is actually an interesting Greek phrase. Some think it means Paul was kind of justifying his sinfulness. That goes against what he's doing here. The term here for ignorance can refer to a willful ignorance. His sinfulness was suppressing the truth. And he was suppressing it because of his unbelief. This doesn't make his sin any better than anyone else! We're all suppressing the truth about God in unbelief.

Yet, even some could still say, "But that was Paul in his past. I have trash in my present." You know what's interesting in this verse? Paul moves from past tense to the present tense when he describes himself. I believe Paul is making a sweeping statement about himself (past and present). Paul's response is, "He came to save the foremost of sinners." Now, what does that mean? Does that mean that Paul is the worst sinner ever? Jesus says there's an unforgiveable sin. Isn't that the worst? Or, can we compare him to Hitler and say Paul's worse? No, that's not what Paul means in this. I believe Paul is saying that he's the worst sinner he knows. One man by the name of William Law wrote, "**We may justly condemn ourselves as the greatest sinners we know because we know more of the folly of our own heart than we do of other people's**" (as quot. in *The Cross-Centered Life* by Mahaney, p. 44). You know the temptations you've felt. You know the anger that has welled up inside of you that no one else has known. You know that if God took off the restraints in your life, that you shutter to think of what you could do. And, some of you here might say, "No, I'd be a great person." But then you realize that sinfulness can be expressed in morality that's apart from God – which is also treason against God. You could defy God by rejecting him and doing life all on your own. Are you the worst sinner you know (or are other people the worst in your mind)?

Will you agree with Jesus? Have you allowed him to expose you? Will you take off the mask? A few years ago, Pastor David made a comment to me that has stuck with me. My story is no longer my story. It's God's story. And I think we can see that clearly in this text. I'll explain a little more later, but Paul is emphasizing the sinfulness of his sin in order to show greater emphasis on the magnitude of Jesus' mercy and grace! If we don't have our sins exposed, we won't know grace.

But there could be some here who say, "Oh, I know how sinful I am. I talk about it all the time and share it with others." My generation (and the one under me) has seemed to turn confession into something *cool*, as though God just wants us to admit that we're horrible sinners and stop there. Maybe there's someone like that here. You say, "Yeah, I'm so bad. You're so bad. We're all so bad, and then you tolerate sin in your life." Listen, confession without repentance is damning. Or, as James says, "Faith without works is dead."

Now, in saying all of this, we must remember that Paul doesn't expose his sinfulness in order to wallow in it. He does it to magnify Christ. And, before I share how Paul does this, I've asked Louie Wolf to share a brief testimony of his life and how God exposed him and freed him from the need of a mask, through Jesus.

----- **Louie Testimony**

2. Jesus came to give overflowing grace (vv. 12, 14-15).

Something that I've found almost confusing is that as I've expressed my weakness with men who take Christ seriously, I've not become weaker, but instead, I've become stronger. Through deepening relationships around Christ, I actually pursue Jesus *more* as I've agreed with God and exposed my sin. This is the message of Scripture and we shouldn't be shocked by it. Jesus came as a light in the darkness. He came as the physician for the sick, not the well. He gives grace to the humble not the prideful. He saves sinners, not the righteous. And, this is the point of Paul in this text. His emphasis isn't "Look how great I confess and talk about how weak I am." If that's the point, then Paul is emphasizing self and teaching us to still look to ourselves and trust in our works.

The point of admitting and acknowledging sin is so that he can rejoice all the more in Jesus. So, read verse 12 again: I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service. . . .⁵ He thanks Jesus. He praises Jesus. One man wrote this of this passage, "[Paul] wasn't paralyzed by condemnation. He was exalting God's grace by recognizing his own unworthiness and sin as he marveled at the mercy of God" (Mahaney, p. 44). If we ever lose the severity of the sinfulness of sin, we'll lose the wonder at the exceeding greatness of grace. Paul *thanks* Jesus. And notice that he says here. He thanks Jesus because he has given him strength. The implication is that Paul was powerless to serve and follow God, but Jesus gave him strength – healed him spiritually. How did he do this? Paul says that the Lord judged him faithful and appointed him to his service.

Wait a second. How could Jesus judge Paul faithful? In verse 13 Paul says, "though formerly I was a blasphemer. . . ." Wait a second. Paul wasn't faithful. Yet, Jesus judged him faithful and put him in service. One commentator wrote that this statement refers to the Lord's power through his declaration. When Paul was exposed and agreed with God about his sinfulness. When Paul turned to Jesus as his life – instead of himself and his sin – the Lord declared him faithful. And, that declaration over Paul made it so that Paul would be faithful. Just like God can say, "Let there be light, and there's light," God said over Paul, "Faithful," and Paul became faithful in God's service.

Is that a miracle?! Now, some here might say, "How can God do this? How can God forgive and declare this over Paul?" It's because Jesus came to save sinners. How did he do this? Through his obedient life and his death, he grants his righteousness to all who trust in him and he took the condemnation we all deserved as he died on the cross. We get the reward from God because Jesus received the punishment from God. Yet, Jesus also was rewarded in raising from the dead and ascending to Heaven! So, all who trust in him are rescued *forever*. Therefore, Paul can say in verse 14, "¹⁴and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."⁶ Paul revels in the overflowing grace he received. He was given faith. He was given love.

God sent Jesus in order to give us dependence on him and love for him – knowing his trustworthiness and his love for us. Isn't that phenomenal to know that we, who were traitors against him through our sinfulness, are welcomed into his love when we admit to our sinfulness and turn to him for forgiveness and life? Therefore, Paul's not going to hide his story. He instead says to Timothy that what he's about to

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Ti 1:12.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Ti 1:14–15.

say is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. In other words, every Christian should believe this and embrace this entirely in their own lives! Jesus came to save sinners – even the foremost sinners!

As Paul says elsewhere, where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more! Do you rejoice in God's greatness and goodness? One of the reasons I asked Louie to share a brief testimony is because there's not a month that goes by where Louie rehearses with me how patient and loving God has been towards him. He remembers his past and he's astounded in his present. And, he still talks about his weaknesses and how the Lord has been and continues to be good. Louie can't get over God's overflowing grace. That's how we all ought to be. Paul teaches us this. It's deserving of *full acceptance*. Take off the mask because:

3. Jesus came to display his glory through us (vv. 16-17).

Verse 16 says, 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.”⁷

Ok, think of the context of these words again. Paul is showing a difference between a false gospel, false teachers and the true gospel and true believers. The false gospel is a “good news of self-improvement” and false teachers emphasize what they do that's good. The true gospel is Jesus came to save sinners, of whom we are all foremost. And therefore, we are all examples to one another and the world of God saving sinners.

This goes back to that quote from David. My story is no longer my story. It's God's story. We see that when God communicates to us all about the sins of the saints in the Bible. And Paul reveals through his example that this is how we should be like as well – open and transparent about our stories. Yet, I know the concerns you have. If I tell people my past, what will they think of me? Other people have shunned me because of it. Or, you could say, “If people know my battle against lust or greed or drink or food or status or anger, I'll be shunned.” The problem with all of that thinking is that you're more concerned about yourself than you are about Jesus' glory. Jesus came to display his glory through us. How does he do that? By showing his strength in your weakness. Your story isn't your story. It's his story. And it's his story of *redemption!*

When Paul says Jesus came to save sinners, that doesn't just mean that Jesus came to make sure you're forgiven, but good luck for the rest of your life. No! Salvation includes being forgiven, being declared righteous by God and also his promise to grow you in godliness. Jesus came to display his glory through your weakness. If you refuse to trust him for this work, you're rebelling against the Savior of the world – and you're doing the devil a favor! Jesus came to expose and display his glory through you. The devil wants it all hidden because then Jesus won't be seen as the Savior.

The reason Jesus has given you overflowing, super-abounding mercy is so that through you, a foremost sinner, Jesus Christ might display to the world his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe. Listen, the world needs to see people who are imperfect and who also point to the perfect Savior. If they see that we not only are weak, but that somehow we're growing and rejoicing in Jesus; God will draw people to himself. We must not be so concerned about ourselves, but instead about Jesus' glory and the souls of people around us.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Ti 1:16.

I know many of you know this, but I've had so many conversations with many people in this church family and I've thought, "If you'd just open up more about that, someone else would be helped." There are people in this church who battle in their minds about their parents divorce and they need another believer to admit that, too, and show how the Lord has strengthened them. There's people here who have been incarcerated. People who battle depression and anxiety. Others with various addictions. And, you could say, "Um, this doesn't sound like a good place to be anymore. Should I be nervous?" Only if we reject Jesus. But if we truly are open and transparent, then Jesus promises to maximize his glory through us and grow us in obedience to him.

"But, Pastor Timothy, I'm still nervous." Yep, I understand. Honestly, if you weren't nervous, then you probably didn't get it! But will your desire for Jesus and his glory eclipse your nervousness or, to go back to the sermon two weeks ago, will you embrace the fear of man more than the fear of God? Paul is so overwhelmed by the mercy and grace of God overflowing to him that he is then led to praise God for all that he is.

Here, Paul exposes the darkness of his sin by bringing it to the light and in his confession shows that sin has no power over him, the Lord does. He's free how without the mask. What about you? Who are you talking to? Are you free? If you are, live like it! If you don't have someone in this church who you are open and transparent with regularly, I'm concerned for you. As application, I'd encourage you to talk to someone *today* if this isn't a regular occurrence in your life. There will be elders and some women at the end of the service. Talk. Be open. See how we can encourage each other and also declare that the darkness doesn't win! Jesus, who is our Light, who is our Savior who came to save foremost sinners, has saved us!

But you could say, "This sounds like you're telling me to live with my shame and guilt. I don't want to grovel." No! Don't grovel. Rejoice in Jesus! The point isn't to stop on yourself, but to rehearse how glorious Jesus' salvation is. If you don't recognize your sin and sinfulness, you'll lose the wonder of grace. But I know, sometimes people live with shame, and when they think of their sins and sinfulness it envelopes them in despair. That's not what God wants. Instead, we who trust Jesus, when we ponder those sins that sometimes kill us to think about, are reminded that Jesus was killed and condemned for our sins. Therefore, the condemnation is taken in him! What rejoicing! We can continuously experience the freedom he's given!

So, I want to read to you from one man who wrote on this passage: **"So admit you're the worst sinner you know. Admit you're unworthy and deserve to be condemned. But don't stop there! Move on to rejoicing in the Savior who came to save the worst of sinners. Lay down the luggage of condemnation. And kneel down in worship at the feet of Him who bore your sins. Cry tears of amazement"** (Mahaney, p. 44).

If saying you're the worst sinner you know, doesn't lead you to rejoice in Jesus, then you're missing the gospel. Biblical logic for the Christian leads to praise the Lord. That's why we get to verse 17 and Paul goes into a doxology – a song of praise: ¹⁷**To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.**⁸ Praise God! Paul refers to him as the King of the ages. He is King over all. All kings get their minute glory from his eternal power! God is immortal. He's not human. He's not subject to death or ceasing to exist. And he's invisible – meaning he's not limited by the seen realm. He's over all and works in and through all.

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Ti 1:17.

To this King be honor and glory forever and ever! The word “honor” refers to the public acknowledgment of God’s worth. God deserves to always be publicly acknowledged as being of superior worth. But, you can acknowledge God is worthy and not embrace it personally. Therefore, we have the word “glory.” Glory is the recognition of the honor. When we put these two terms together, Paul is saying God is worthy of honor and we believe it’s rightly owed to him!

Only when your sin is exposed, you affirm this and know Jesus’ overflowing grace, displaying his glory through you, will you then say, “King of the ages, be honor and glory *forever and ever!*” And, you know what? Those of us who have experienced this rescue by Jesus will rejoice in him *forever and ever*. Even in eternity future, Jesus will have the scars in his hands, reminding us of his great salvation that we will exult in. We won’t be filled in shame for eternity. We’ll be filled with perfect rejoicing. But it’s not because of us. It’s not because of our self-righteousness. It’s because of Jesus. **He came into this world to save sinners, not simply sinners as a whole, but individual sinners (like Zaccheus). And, when we say “like Zaccheus,” we mean that Jesus saves the worst sinner we know – ourselves. So, if you have trusted in Jesus, rejoice! Since Jesus saves the foremost of sinners, he can save anyone.**

This Christmas (and every season), praise Jesus that he came to save you, the foremost sinner. Salvation has come to many of our homes. And, in celebration of Christmas, let his story and his power be known through you.

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