

## The Reason I Was Shown Mercy

### I Timothy 1:12-17 (NIV)

<sup>12</sup> I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. <sup>13</sup> Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. <sup>14</sup> The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. <sup>16</sup> But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. <sup>17</sup> Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

A multiple choice question to start today: Out of the following choices, who should go to heaven? a) Mahatma Gandhi, b) Mother Theresa, or c) an ISIS terrorist. All of them worked for a cause that they believed in, a cause they deemed as good and as serving of a greater good, but who should go to heaven? How about this one: Who should represent Christianity to the world? a) Reverend Billy Graham, b) The Pope, or c) Bill Maher. They all claim to know what is right and true, but all three have conflicting views about what Christianity is.

Now, we could argue over the choices, maybe say some are more deserving than others, but I think we could reasonably eliminate one choice from each of the questions. The ISIS terrorist is someone who wants to destroy Christianity. Why should he get to go to heaven while other people like Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Theresa tried to make the world a better place through non-violent measures and acts of kindness? And we can eliminate Bill Maher from being the representative of Christianity because he's an atheist. Not only does he not believe in what Christianity stands for, but he makes fun of those who do believe in it.

People in the first century Christian Church had to be thinking very similarly if you would have given them these questions with options like Peter, the High Priest, and Paul. Peter, he followed Jesus. He's a good guy. He should be an ambassador for Christianity. The High Priest, well, he was chosen by family lineage as the high priest has been chosen for over a thousand years. But Paul?? Even Paul himself admits that he was "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man." (verse 13)

Paul was not fit to be a representative of Christianity. He went around Jerusalem and the surrounding areas arresting people who professed to follow and believe in Christ Jesus. He locked them up. He worked on them in prison to try to get them to renounce their beliefs. And when a vote was called for in order to execute these followers, Paul cast his vote that they should die! Paul breathed out murderous threats against Christians. He actively tried to destroy the name of Christ Jesus and get all people to stop following this so-called Messiah. He confesses his past right here in this letter. He is the "worst of sinners!" (verse 16) There is no way that Paul should represent Christ to the world.

Yet what did God do for Paul? "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." (verses 13-14) Even though Paul was the counter example of who should be saved, of who should represent Christ Jesus to the world, God had mercy on him. It wasn't until God showed mercy to him and called him from his life of persecuting Christians that he finally realized how ignorant he was to try to destroy God's Church and how hostile he had been against God because of his unbelief.

If we were picking a team to represent God to the world, we would never have picked Paul. He was not the underdog, not the dark horse. He was the enemy. He was the person that you were fighting against, the person who wanted to kill you. But God had other things in mind. He poured out his grace, his undeserved love, on Paul to the point where it overflowed with faith and love. God sought his enemy so that he could have mercy on him.

Today is the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the terrorist attacks that took place on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. If you were alive then, you probably remember where you were, what you were doing when you first heard the horrific news. You remember the stories immediately following, of emergency responders, firefighters, police officers, and others going to help, running to sift through the wreckage that was once the twin towers, looking for any signs of life. Do you think any of those emergency responders or medics were looking for the terrorists who took over those planes and flew them into the towers? Were they sifting through the rubble hoping to save the lives of those who brought death and destruction to our nation's soil?

Well, that's just ridiculous, right? If they were looking for those terrorists, it was probably to get the remains to identify them so that we as a nation would know who to blame, who to punish. If those emergency responders would have found them, it would have been to put them on trial, to punish them to full extent of the law for the travesty against humanity that they incurred at the cost of our people's lives.

But if God had been one of those emergency responders, he would have sifted through the rubble hoping to find those terrorists so that he could tend to them, so that he could heal them, so that he could save them. We know from our Gospel reading today that God actively seeks the lost. He is the shepherd who leaves behind the 99 sheep so that he can go looking for that one that strayed. He is the woman who lit the lamp and swept the whole house to find that one lost coin. When he found what was lost, he called everyone around to rejoice. These pictures from the Gospel make God look so compassionate and nice. Who wouldn't go after a cute, cuddly little sheep who lost its way and is so helpless? Who wouldn't try to recover something so valuable as a tenth of all the money they have.

Our reading from 1 Timothy shows us that God does not just seek and save the lost ones who are attractive, who are cute and cuddly, who have more worth than others. No, God seeks and saves his enemies. He would go sifting through the rubble to find and save terrorists. Why? Paul explains: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst." (verse 15)

Paul knew that God would seek and save not just people who were misguided, who lost their way, who didn't really mean to do bad things. God seeks his enemies like he did with Paul. "For that very reason [because I, Paul, am the worst of sinners] I was shown mercy so that in me ... Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life." (verse 16)

Just step back and soak that in. God seeks his enemies in order to show them mercy and compassion and patience. He seeks them out so that they will believe in him and be saved even though they are his enemies. They hate him. They want nothing to do with him. They want to destroy him, but God seeks them out to save them. Not to bring divine retribution. Not to smite their blatant blasphemy. He seeks out the worst sinners in order to bring them to believe in him as their Savior and so that they would receive eternal life and go to heaven. This is our God, the one who shows mercy because he wants all people to be saved. Not because they deserve it. Not because they aren't as bad as the rest. But because our God out of his immense patience and total mercy seeks and saves the lost.

This message changes lives. God loves me not because I am lovable, but even as I am the opposite of that. Paul was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, but then he was shown mercy. What would our "I was once" statement be? Who was I when God sought me out so that I would believe in him and receive eternal life? I was once a liar, a cheat, a gossip, but God showed me mercy. I was once an adulterer, a drunkard, an addict, a lawbreaker, but God showed me mercy. I was once a negligent parent, a rebellious teenager, a bad son, but God showed me mercy. I was once an atheist, an enemy of God, fighting against him tooth and nail, rejecting him at every turn, making fun of Christians, but God showed me mercy. That is what we were, and God sought us in spite of it all to save us, his enemies, treating us not as we deserve.

Knowing that God has sought you out when you were a sinner, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst, just like Paul, how will you show that mercy to others? What enemy in your life will you go out of your way to seek so that you can show them the mercy of God? How will you display God's patience to so that they might believe in him and receive eternal life? Think of those people whom God has placed in your life. How can you show them mercy the way God has shown it to you? Pray for them. Pray that God would keep that person on earth until they see the mercy that God has for them, that God would find them just as he found the lost sheep and the lost coin, just as he found you and had mercy on you.

God entrusted this ministry to Paul of seeking and saving the lost with his message not because Paul was so deserving or worthy or good at it. God appointed him to serve because he had mercy on him, because he had poured out his grace on Paul so abundantly. God has appointed you to show that same mercy, to seek the lost, to seek your enemies so that they can know God's mercy. Remembering that God sought you and sought Paul even though you were his enemies just so that he could have mercy on you, so we now in turn show God's mercy to our enemies. Amen.

"To the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, the one who has shown us mercy, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen." (verse 17)