

“CHRIST’S PERFECT PATIENCE DISPLAYED”

I. Introduction

- A. The English minister and hymn-writer John Newton penned the following epitaph to be inscribed on his tomb:

*John Newton
Once an infidel and libertine
A servant of slaves in Africa
Was
By the mercy of our Lord and Saviour
Jesus Christ
Preserved, restored, pardoned
And appointed to preach the faith
He had long laboured to destroy.*

- B. Newton never forgot about the vile life that he had lived prior to his conversion.
- C. This is reflected in the opening lines of his most famous hymn,
- Amazing grace! — how sweet the sound —
That saved a wretch like me!*
- D. It is also attested by one of the last statements he made from his deathbed: “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior.”
- E. Our text in 1 Timothy shows us that the apostle Paul also remembered those two things.
- F. In these verses, Paul shows how his Christian experience and call to the ministry serves as a picture of Christ’s perfect patience to undeserving sinners.

II. The Gratitude of One Who Was Formerly an Insolent Opponent

- A. Paul's thoughts in these verses come on the heels of his description of himself in verse 11 as one who has been entrusted with the gospel.
1. It seems as though that statement led Paul to pause and reflect upon the astounding grace that Christ had shown to him.
 2. And this prompts him to express his gratitude to Christ, saying, "I thank him who has given me strength."
 3. Notice that Paul speaks of his salvation as a matter of being given strength.
 4. This is a helpful way of thinking about the grace that God pours out upon us in the gospel of his Son.
 5. Prior to conversion, we are spiritually powerless.
 6. And even after our conversion, our strength as Christians does not come from inside ourselves.
 7. I am not going to make myself a t-shirt emblazoned with the words "Wilson Strong" on it.
 8. A Christian's strength is not intrinsic but extrinsic.
 9. It comes from our union with Christ.
 10. As Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 12 while speaking of his plea that the Lord would remove his mysterious thorn in the flesh, "he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Cor. 12:9-10 ESV)

- B. Paul also says that he thanks the Lord “because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service.”
1. Don’t misunderstand that statement.
 2. Paul is not saying that he was appointed to the ministry because he proved himself to be faithful.
 3. Prior to his conversion he was trying to destroy the church.
 4. What Paul means is that Christ was willing to entrust the apostolic ministry to him at the time of his conversion, in spite of the fact that Paul had been anything but faithful up to that point.
 5. Jesus did not appoint Paul to his service because of any inherent worthiness in Paul.
 6. As Jesus says in Acts 9, Paul was his chosen instrument to carry his name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.
- C. Notice that Paul is grateful for being appointed to Christ’s service.
1. People don’t aspire to be servants.
 2. In our radically egalitarian culture, the notion of being somebody else’s servant is offensive.
 3. But what we have to understand is that Bob Dylan was right when he sang the words, “You’re gonna have to serve somebody.”
 4. As Paul explains in Romans 6, you are either a slave of sin or you are a slave of obedience.
 5. The person who thinks that he is his own master is deluded.
 6. Slavery to self is slavery to sin.

7. You will either have sin for your master, or you will have Christ for your master.
 8. And if Christ is your master, then you are truly free.
 9. You have received the blessing of living in willing service to the One by whom and for whom you were created.
- D. In verse 13, Paul describes his pre-converted self as “a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.”
1. Now, remember who Paul was at that point in his life.
 2. He had received the best rabbinical training available.
 3. He was on track to be numbered among the most prominent figures in first century Judaism.
 4. As he puts it in Philippians 3, he was a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee in relation to the law, a man consumed with such zeal that he persecuted the church because he thought that it was a blasphemous sect.
 5. Yet the irony is that in doing this, he was the one who was guilty of blasphemy.
 6. He was holding the name of God in contempt.
 7. He was raging against Christ and seeking to destroy the church.
 8. We see a similar rage today in those who have been described as “the new atheists,” who contend that belief in God is at the root of society’s ills.
 9. We see this rage in the work of someone like New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, a former evangelical who now devotes his life to trying to discredit the Bible.

10. This is not surprising, because in our fallen estate we are all by nature haters of God.
 11. What is surprising — wonderfully surprising — is that God would show mercy to such people.
- E. As Paul describes the mercy that Christ showed him, he says that he received mercy because he “had acted ignorantly in unbelief.”
1. In saying this, Paul is by no means trying to excuse his sin.
 2. Ignorance does not absolve a person who has broken the law.
 3. If you tell the police officer who pulled you over for speeding that you didn’t know what the speed limit was, he is not going to apologize for inconveniencing you.
 4. What Paul is saying here is that his insolence prior to his conversion was like the sins that were categorized as “unintentional” under the Mosaic law.
 5. Those violations of the law still had to be atoned for, but they could be forgiven.
 6. That system of classification was used by God to show that there is a category of sin that cannot be forgiven, the sin that is referred to by Jesus as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.
 7. John Calvin defined blasphemy against the Holy Spirit this way: undertaking “a voluntary war against God, in order to extinguish the light of the Spirit which has been offered.”
 8. The general rule of thumb for identifying this sin is that if you are concerned that you might have committed it, you can be certain that you haven’t done so.
 9. Those who have truly blasphemed the Holy Spirit have completely hardened their hearts toward God.

10. As grievous as Paul's sin was, it was not of that nature.
11. He could say that he acted in ignorance because he was blinded by his sin, a point that Jesus underscored for him by striking him with physical blindness for a brief period of time.
12. And just as Paul's physical eyes were opened when he went to Ananias, he also received spiritual sight so that he could embrace Christ in faith.

III. The Overflowing Grace of the Lord

- A. This brings us to verse 14, where Paul continues to describe the mercy that was extended to him by saying, "the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."
 1. This is a beautiful statement, and it is worth taking a few moments to unpack it.
 2. The term "grace" has been helpfully defined by J.I. Packer as follows: "The grace of God is love freely shown towards guilty sinners, contrary to their merit and indeed in defiance of their demerit. It is God showing goodness to persons who deserve only severity, and had no reason to expect anything but severity." [J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 120]
 3. When we think of grace along those lines, we can understand why Paul would describe it as something that overflows for us in the gospel of Jesus Christ.
 4. We have all seen things that are overflowing, so this is an image that we can easily call to mind.
 5. Paul employs this image in order to stress the superabundance of God's grace to us in Christ.
 6. It is more than sufficient to meet our spiritual needs.

7. It never runs out.
 8. It keeps flowing and flowing and flowing.
 9. And Paul tells us what it overflows with.
 10. It overflows with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.
 11. In other words, God's grace brings us into the sphere where we have the faith and love that are in Christ.
 12. By his grace, God works faith in us, and the faith that he works in us produces the fruit of love for God and for our neighbor.
- B. As we come to verse 15, we find the first of five "trustworthy sayings" that appear in the Pastoral Epistles.
1. These are pithy statements that had a proverbial familiarity to them.
 2. They may have been taken from early creedal statements or hymns.
 3. This one is, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."
 4. That statement bears a close similarity to the words of Jesus himself when he said, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45 ESV)
 5. The purpose for which Jesus came into the world was to secure redemption for people who only deserved condemnation.
 6. The wonderful thing about the "trustworthy saying" that Paul cites in verse 15 is that it assures us that our sin can in no way disqualify us from being able to receive what is offered in the gospel.
 7. As Martin Luther once said, "the more miserable, sinful, and distressed a man feels and judges himself to be, the more willing is Christ to receive and relieve him." [*Marrow of Marrow*, 72]

8. Though it is true that only the elect will come to Christ, it is also true that he invites any and all to come to him for salvation, and he promises that he will never turn away anyone who does so.
- C. Paul appends an additional phrase to the trustworthy saying that he cites in verse 15, identifying himself as the foremost of sinners.
1. This is not false humility on Paul's part.
 2. As he reflected on his life prior to his conversion, he was overwhelmed with grief at the offenses that he had committed against the Lord.
 3. This is an impulse that should be present in the heart of every believer.
 4. We should be so sensible of our own corruption that we give up on thinking highly of ourselves in comparison to others.
 5. All we can see is how miserably we fall short of God's standard.
 6. And though we do advance in our sanctification, this does not cause us to think better of ourselves.
 7. On the contrary, there is an inverse effect in sanctification, so that the more we grow in grace the better we see how miserable we really are in our sinful flesh.
 8. Yet this does not lead us to despair, because it only calls further attention to the overflowing grace that God lavishes upon us in Christ.
- D. First Timothy 1:15 has been a great source of encouragement for a number of believers throughout history.
1. You may know that John Bunyan drew upon this verse for the title of his autobiography, which he called "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners."

2. There was also a 16th century English martyr named Thomas Bilney who was converted by reading this verse.
3. Prior to that point, Bilney had searched for peace with God to no avail.
4. But that all changed when he came across 1 Timothy 1:15.
5. He would later write, "This one sentence, through God's instruction and inward working, ... did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my sins, and being almost in despair, that even immediately I seemed unto myself inwardly to feel a marvellous comfort and quietness, insomuch that 'my bruised bones leaped for joy' (Psalm 51)." [cited in Stott, 53-54]

IV. Conclusion

- A. Before Paul was converted, he was seething with hatred toward Christ and his church.
 1. When Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, he said to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4 ESV)
 2. Notice that Jesus said "me," not "my people."
 3. Paul was going after Christ's precious Bride.
 4. Jesus took that as a personal offense.
 5. By persecuting the church, Paul was persecuting Jesus himself.
 6. Yet this did not cause Jesus to withhold his grace from Paul.
- B. In extending mercy to Paul, Christ displayed his perfect patience, so that this would stand as a source of encouragement to all who will believe in him for eternal life.
 1. If God's grace overflowed for a sinner like Paul, then we have no reason to doubt that this same grace will continue to overflow for

us.

2. The more we reflect upon this, the better we understand why Paul concludes this passage as he does, by breaking forth in spontaneous doxology.
3. It is as if he can't help but give voice to the praise that God deserves.
4. May the same be true of us.
5. "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."