



Text: 1 Tim 1:12-17¹

Series: Living as Gospel People

Title: Part 3 – Preaching the Gospel to Ourselves

Date: November 8, 2009

Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

You might have noticed the sign outside the church this week. It says...

“Unhappiness is often the result of listening to ourselves instead of talking to ourselves.”

It’s a quote I’ve borrowed from Martin Lloyd-Jones, a British preacher of the mid-twentieth century. The full quotation runs like this: “Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself.”² What Lloyd-Jones was speaking to is our tendency to allow our feelings and circumstances to dictate to us how we feel and think about ourselves and our lives.

“Listening to ourselves” is paying attention to that little voice in our heads that reminds us of our failures, that condemns us for our inadequacies, that shouts to us that the brokenness around us is merely a reflection of the incompetence within us.

In the face of repeated frustrations and disappointment, we say to ourselves: “My life is unbearable! I haven’t got the strength to go on. I can’t!”

In response to our recurring failures and shortcomings, we say to ourselves: “I can’t do it. I’m useless. I have nothing to offer. I’m good for nothing.”

When the harshness of our words or the insensitivity of our actions comes back to haunt us, we say to ourselves: “I am such a jerk! I am no good. How could I have been so cruel? I am so ashamed!”

What we need in moments like these is a sermon. Not one of mine or one by your favourite preacher. We need one preached by our own minds to our own hearts out of God’s revelation of his great love and grace for us in Jesus Christ. We need to preach the Gospel to ourselves.

I want to show you what I mean by preaching the Gospel to ourselves and one of the best examples we can find is the sermon that Paul preached to himself as he

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² As quoted in C.J. Mahaney, *Living the Cross Centered Life*, p. 37.



wrote to his friend, Timothy. You'll find it in Paul's First Letter to Timothy, chapter 1, verses 12 to 17.

I refer to Paul's words here as "preaching the Gospel to himself" because in verse 11 to chapter 1, Paul has just been speaking about...

"...the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted." 1 Timothy 1:11

What follows, then is Paul's "Gospel sermon" to himself. Here it is...

"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 ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." (1 Timothy 1:12-17)

In these words written by Paul to his close friend and associate Timothy, we are granted a special insight into the inner-workings of Paul's heart and mind. What we read here isn't merely Paul's personal testimony of the effect of the gospel on his own heart. It's Paul's personal testimony, intended to serve as an example for us all. This little passage is saturated with the word "I." It is a very personal testimony to the workings of God's grace in his life, but it's also intended to be very public. Paul understood that what God was doing in his life was being done for others. He knew that God's grace in his life was to serve...

**"as an example to those who were to believe in [Jesus] for eternal life."
Verse 16**

Paul loved to share his story of God's grace. In addition to what we read here, we can find him telling his story twice in the Book of Acts (Acts 22:3-21; 26:9-18), again in his letter to the Galatians (1:11-17), and in his letter to the Philippians (3:4-11). Paul is probably the Bible's best example of someone who "loved to tell the story of Jesus and his love." Here in Timothy he gives us a very brief summary of who was before he became an apostle of Jesus Christ. He wrote...

**"formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent." 1
Timothy 1:13**



Paul had been one of the Gospel's most aggressive opponents. He had been raised in the traditions of Pharisaical Judaism and had come to see Jesus and his followers as heretics and apostates from the true faith in God. He refers to himself as a **"blasphemer."** To "blaspheme" is to make false declarations about the person and character of God. That, in fact, was what he accused Christians of doing by their faith in Jesus as God's Messiah and the Saviour of the world. In his testimony in Acts chapter 26, he said...

"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities." Acts 26:9-11

He calls himself a **"persecutor."** He persecuted believers in Jesus wherever he could find them, even travelling to foreign cities to try and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial and imprisonment. It was on one of these trips, that Paul met Jesus Christ. He was travelling to the city of Damascus because he had received letters from the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem authorizing him to arrest Jews in Damascus who believed in Jesus. But on that Damascus Road, Jesus stopped Paul in his tracks and he said to Paul...

"why are you persecuting me?" Acts 9:4

Although Paul thought he was persecuting believers in Jesus, in reality he was persecuting Jesus himself!

Paul called himself an **"insolent opponent."** The word translated here carries with it the sense of someone who is so filled with contempt and hatred for another that his actions towards them are violent and cruel.³ The NASB translates the word as "violent aggressor." Last week we saw a video highlighting the situation of the persecuted church and one of the scenes pictured an anti-Christian mob. The camera focused on a man whose face was contorted in hatred and rage. That is what Paul meant by "insolent opponent" of the Gospel. Paul's treatment of believers in Jesus fit that description. In his retelling of his story in Acts chapter 22 he said...

"I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women" Acts 22:4

³ Wuest's Word Studies in the Greek New Testament, loc. cit.



You need to know where Paul came from before he met Jesus Christ. The kind of life he had lived was a memory he could never shake. After he came to Christ he knew he was forgiven, but the memory of all that had been done never died.

There is a scene in the recent movie, *Amazing Grace*, where Albert Finney, who played the role of John Newton, speaks about Newton's memory of his life as a slave trader. "I live in the company of 20,000 ghosts," Newton is quoted as saying to a young William Wilberforce. John Newton estimated that he had conveyed some 20,000 Africans from the West coast of Africa to the Americas as slaves, many of whom were tortured and died along the way. How many believers in Jesus had Paul clapped in chains and dragged to Jerusalem, some to their deaths? We'll never know. But you can be sure that Paul knew and that he never forgot!

Paul wrote...

"For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." 1 Corinthians 15:9

Paul had "ghosts." Do you have "ghosts" in your life? We all have "ghosts" and most of us have thousands of them. Memories of words we have said that should have died before they reached our lips or our keyboards. Remembrances of things we have done of which we are deeply and profoundly ashamed. How do deal with them? How do we put our "ghosts" to rest?

There's only one real solution: **God's grace and mercy!**

Although he remembered vividly his life as a persecutor of Jesus Christ and his church, although he felt unworthy to be called an apostle, Paul wrote...

"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain." 1 Corinthians 15:10

Is God's grace to you and me ever "in vain"? Only if we allow the memory of our sin to rob us of the joy of Christ's perfect and complete forgiveness for us. Only if we allow the regrets of our failures to keep us from being useful in God's hands as messengers of His love and grace. Only when we allow our "ghosts" to drive us into despair or bitterness or rage, rather than to drive us into the open, merciful, gracious arms of our Lord, only then is God's grace to us ever "in vain."

C.J. Mahaney is a pastor in the Washington, D.C. area. He has lived in the same area since he was a boy. As he tells his story of God's grace in his life, he too was once a blasphemer. Before coming to faith in Christ in 1972, he wrote,...



“I lived for myself and my own pleasure. I lived in rebellion against God and mocked those who followed Him. I spent my high school and college days deeply immersed in the drug culture.”

Mahaney talks about how he and his friends would often seek out quiet, isolated places in the D.C. area to come down from their drug highs, perhaps one of the many Washington monuments, a peaceful tree-lined street or even the deserted corridors of the Dulles airport. Rarely does a day go by when he doesn't pass one of those places in his work as a pastor. The memories flood back.

“Often,” he wrote, “my eyes fill with tears at the memories of my foolishness and sin. And in the same instant, my heart will be filled with an unspeakable, holy joy. By the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross, I've been forgiven of the countless sins I've committed.”

Many people, he notes, try to run from their past. They run from the “ghosts.” “I suppose,” he wrote, “I, too could try that by leaving the hometown that holds so many reminders of my sinfulness. But I consider living here a gift from God. The regular reminders of my past are precious to me. Why? Because, like Paul, I never want to forget the great mercy shown me.” (C.J. Mahaney, *Living the Cross Centred Life*, p. 27-28)

Paul wrote to Timothy...

“formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy....” 1 Timothy 1:13

“Christ Jesus came to save sinners of whom I am the foremost.” 1 Timothy 1:15

Paul wrote, “I am the foremost” of sinners, not “I was” or “I used to be.” He had an abiding sense of being a redeemed sinner, never forgetting from where he had come.

What did God's grace and mercy do for Paul? Remember, whatever God did for Paul he did as an example of what he'll do for you and me. What God's grace and mercy did for Paul he'll do for us, too.

You could spend weeks mining this passage for God's grace to Paul and never come to the end of it. Paul describes God's grace as “overflowing.” (v.14) He wrote...

“the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” 1 Timothy 1:14



The word that is translated as “overflowed” is one that Paul probably made up himself in his attempt to find some way to describe the immensity of God’s grace to him. The root of the expression is a word which means “to abound.” Paul used that root word to describe God’s grace in his letter to the Romans. He wrote that wherever you find sin on the increase...

“grace abounded all the more.” Romans 5:20

But “abounding grace” isn’t enough grace for Paul and so he attached a prefix to the word “abounding” when he wrote to Timothy. It’s a word from which we get our word, “super.” When Paul wrote to Timothy he was thinking about **the “super-abounding” grace of God that “overflowed” to him.** The overflowing of God’s grace, as we sang earlier...

“it’s an ocean full of blessing in the midst of every test.”

We could swim for days in this ocean but there are just three little things I want to draw to your minds and hearts attention this morning.

If you find yourself saying, “I can’t go on. I haven’t got the strength!” turn to Paul’s example.

First of all,

Paul testifies to God’s overflowing grace as the source of his strength to face the overwhelming hardships of life

Paul wrote...

“I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service....” 1 Timothy 1:12

In his service for Jesus, Paul faced people whose hearts were as hate-filled as his own had once been. But now the shoe was on the other foot and he, the apostle of Jesus, was the object of their rage. In one of his letters, he wrote of...

“countless beatings” and of being **“often near death.” 1 Corinthians 11:24**

“Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea....” 1 Corinthians 11:24-

25

He spoke of living in constant danger, of enduring unrelenting toil, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst and apart from all this, he wrote, was...



“the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.” 1 Corinthians 11:28

Paul knew hardship and toil and stress and being at the end of his rope and when he got there, grace was waiting for him! Grace was always there! He was never abandoned ... and you won't be either!

How does it feel when the strength of God's grace is overflowing through you? Do you wonder that God's grace is in short supply in your life because you are tired, or anxious, or hungry, or hurting? Paul experienced all of those hardships but in all of them, he said, God "strengthened" me. How does it feel to have God's grace-power coursing through your veins? Here's Paul's description...

“I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.” Colossians 1:29

“I toil ...I struggle... and I will not give up!” That's what the power of God “feels” like. That's what the overflowing grace of God accomplishes in our lives. We stand, when life should be knocking flat! And when we do get knocked down, we get up again!

The overflowing grace of God is our strength and hope and, as Paul wrote...

“we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed....” 2 Corinthians 4:7-9

Brothers and sisters, Paul knew overwhelming hardship but he also knew the “super-abounding” grace of God to meet those challenges. And what God for Paul, he'll do for you!

Many of you have encountered overwhelming challenges in recent months and years. You wonder if you have the strength to go on. My prayer is that Paul's testimony will speak into your life today and give you new strength and confidence in God's power and provision for you.

If you find yourself saying, “I'm useless. I have nothing to offer,” turn to Paul's example.

Secondly,

Paul testifies to God's overflowing grace as the reason for his transformation from persecutor to apostle



Paul thanks Jesus for showing him grace and mercy in calling him into his service as an apostle. He thanks Jesus...

“because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, 1 Timothy 1:12

On first reading, you might think that Paul is saying that God appointed him as an apostle because “he judged me faithful.” In other words, you might read this to say that God was rewarding Paul’s faithfulness by appointing him to his service. But does that fit with grace being God’s unmerited favour to us? Could Paul really be saying that he earned his appointment to God’s service because he was faithful? He was a “blasphemer”! How faithful could he be? He was a persecutor and violent aggressor! What reward did he deserve for that? Only eternal destruction! And Paul confesses that he...

“had acted ignorantly in unbelief” 1 Timothy 1:13

“Unbelief” is literally, “unfaith.” How is someone who acts us in “unfaith” judged as being “faithful”?

To be “judged as faithful” might suggest a picture of God looking at Paul’s record of service and being impressed by his commitment and stick-to-it-ive-ness, and then as a kind of divine “head-hunter,” recruiting him for work in Gospel ministry. That would be like God saying of Paul the persecutor, “Wow, he’s a real catch! I want him on my team!” But, brothers and sisters, that’s not grace! That’s salvation by merit, by works, by self-effort. That’s not super-abounding grace.

The phrase translated as “judged me faithful” in the ESV is translated as **“counted me faithful”** in the **KJV** and as **“considered me faithful”** in the **NASB**. Being “counted” or “considered” faithful paints a very different picture of God’s action. Instead of God reviewing Paul’s record and finding faithfulness in it, we see God setting his design upon Paul and by his sovereign will, making Paul “faithful.” In other words, it was God’s grace that made him faithful.

Does this picture appear elsewhere? Yes. Paul wrote to the Corinthians about various questions relating to Christian marriage. On some of the questions, Jesus had spoken to the issue and so Paul simply relayed what Jesus had said on those matters. On other issues, Paul, speaking by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, gave his own apostolic word on the matter. Jesus had not spoken to one issue and so Paul gave his own views on that question. He wrote...

“I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy.” 1 Corinthians 7:25

The word translated as “trustworthy” here in Corinthians is the same word translated as “faithful” in 1 Timothy. It was God’s mercy to him made him faithful.



And notice what comes to Paul with God's grace...

“the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” 1 Timothy 1:14

To Paul, the man of “unfaith,” God provided “faith” so that he would be “faithful.” Here’s the point: Overflowing grace provides us with everything we need! By God’s grace Paul was made worthy to serve him. Let me just say that sometimes we get caught up in a futile effort of “pop psychology” to look inside ourselves to find some “worthiness” we can offer God. Brothers and sisters, don’t waste your time on the effort! If you say of yourself: “I have nothing to offer Him,” you have arrived at a moment of tremendous clarity and liberty. You have arrived at the door of God’s treasury of grace! I tell you, don’t “look inside yourself, look to Jesus!” Look to God’s empowering, transforming, equipping grace.

On the wall of a church in downtown London there is a plaque. The wording on the plaque was dictated by the author as his own epitaph to be displayed after his death. The writer understood God’s grace. In fact, the words bear the marks of someone who knew Paul’s Letter to Timothy. The man who wrote these words knew that everything good and wholesome in him was the result of God’s gift of grace. This was the summary of his life...

**John Newton
Clerk
Once an infidel [ie. unfaithful man] and libertine,
A servant of slaves in Africa,
Was,
By the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,
Preserved, Restored, Pardoned and
Appointed to preach the faith
He had long laboured to destroy.**

Newton knew Paul and Paul knew grace. Look to God’s grace!

If you find yourself overwhelmed with shame because of your sin and unable to experience God’s mercy and joy, turn to Paul’s example.

Finally,

Paul testifies to God’s overflowing grace as the reason for his confidence that all sin – his sin, your sin, my sin – is completely forgiven in Jesus Christ

Paul wrote...



“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. But I received mercy...” 1 Timothy 1:15-16

Many people over the years have thought that Paul might be exaggerating just slightly. The “foremost” sinner? Really? What about serial killers and mass murderers? What about some of the historic monsters of the world, the men and women whose cruelty and vice shocked even other “sinners”?

No, I think Paul was right for at least two reasons.

First, comparison really doesn't have anything to do with determining who the “foremost” sinner is. You see, for someone who knows grace there are always only two people in the confession room. Let me explain.

Jesus told a parable about two men who came to pray in the temple in Jerusalem. One was a Pharisee, a religious leader among a group who were very fixated on their own goodness. According to Jesus...

“The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’” Luke 18:11-12

Notice how full the room was. There is the Pharisee, God, a host of “other men” whose crimes are listed and finally, there is “this tax collector.” This man's confessional was really very crowded but sadly, as Jesus said, the Pharisee went home unforgiven.

The other man at the temple to pray was the “tax collector.” According to Jesus...

“the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’” Luke 18:13 (NASB)

Not “a sinner,” but “the sinner.” That is literally what it says. Notice who is in this man's confessional: God and “the sinner.” Just two people. Paul understood that. Paul was so aware of his own sin before a holy God that it just didn't dawn on him that others might be considered worse sinners.

But I think Paul was right to call himself the “foremost” of sinners for another reason as well. What was the nature of Paul's sin? Paul identified himself as blasphemer and persecutor. Earlier, we noted that when Jesus Christ met him on the road to Damascus, Jesus had said to him...



“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Acts 9:4-5

Paul’s sin was directed straight to the heart of Jesus. Although Paul that that he was beating, torturing and even killing men and women, Jesus told Paul that he was really beating, torturing and killing him.

Many sins are perpetrated against people, but ultimately, all sin is an attack upon God. Paul’s sin went to the heart of all sin – it was an arrow aimed at the heart of God! And for that reason, Paul was absolutely right to call himself the “foremost” of sinners. And the grace shown to him by God is God’s promise that there is no sin beyond the reach of his mercy.

It doesn’t matter what we’ve done. It doesn’t matter what we’ve said or what we’ve thought, God’s mercy reached Paul and it will reach us, too. You may feel overwhelming sorrow and shame for your sin, but please hear me: by His mercy, God wants to transform that shame into gratitude for his “super-abounding” grace. Will you let him?

Some years ago I heard Rebecca Pippert share this story of the way in which God’s grace lifted one woman’s shame. I heard this story over twenty years ago and its power has stayed with me. I hope it draws your heart to the overflowing grace that God wants to pour on you.

Becky Pippert said...

Several years ago, after I had spoken at a conference, a lovely woman came and spoke to me. She was beautiful, she was godly, and she was tortured. She told me her story. She said that she and her fiancé, many years ago, had been the leaders of a youth group at her church. And they had a tremendous ministry. They were to get married in June and somewhere in that year they began to have sex. Then she discovered she was pregnant. She said she felt bad enough that the very thing that she was trying to counsel others not to do she was doing, but to find out that she was pregnant was much worse. She said that she knew the church could never handle her failure. ... And so she said they decided to have an abortion.

"My wedding day," she went on, "was the worst day of my life. Becky, I love my husband. We've had many children, but I am tortured. I do not know where to go with my guilt because I believe I have murdered an innocent life. I am haunted by the question, What have I destroyed? I know that God loves and forgives but I cannot be released from this thought, How could I have ever murdered an innocent life?"

A thought came to me; but I was afraid to say it because she was so distraught, and I realized that if this thought wasn't from God, I could destroy her. But she



kept saying, "How could I have done this? How could I have murdered an innocent life?"

I took a deep breath and said, "I don't know why you're so surprised. Because this isn't your first murder; it's your second." Then I continued, "My dear friend, all of us are crucifiers when we look at the cross. You seem to feel more guilt over killing your own child than killing God's child. All of us, religious or irreligious, good or bad, aborters or nonaborters, all of us show up as crucifiers when we look at Jesus. Jesus died for all of our sin, past, present and future. Luther says we carry his very nails in our pockets. This isn't your first murder of an innocent. It's your second. And I'm just surprised that you're so surprised that you could do it."

She looked at me in amazement and stopped crying. And she said "You're right it's true. I have done something even worse than killing my own child. It doesn't matter that Jesus died 2,000 years ago; he died for all of our sins. And I have never felt the same remorse over killing God's son as in killing my son. But, Becky, what you're really telling me is that I've done something even worse than the worst thing that I could ever imagine." I nodded. "Becky, if the cross shows me as even worse than I thought, the cross also shows me that my evil has been absorbed and forgiven. Oh, Becky, talk about amazing grace."
(www.urbana.org/articles/evangelism-the-heart-of-missions-urbana-87)

It's amazing and it's available for you and me! Let's pray.

- Can't go on? -- God's grace gives strength
- Nothing to offer? – God's grace provides what we need
- So ashamed? – God's grace offers mercy to all

- **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**
- **Final Song:** And Can It Be? (#347)
- **Benediction**