

With A Grateful Heart!
Grateful For God's Mercy!
1 Timothy 1:12-17

When I was the Senior Chaplain at the United States Naval Academy, I developed the habit of reciting the *Kyrie Eleison* whenever I was in need of God's guidance or help – which, by the frequency of that recitation, was apparently quite often! For those of you who may not know what I'm talking about, the *Kyrie Eleison* is a form of prayer derived from the Greek phrase *eleison me kyrie* which means "Lord, have mercy on me." And so I would sometimes walk through my office spaces or through the Academy halls saying quietly to myself, "Lord have mercy!" And those who knew me well would sometimes give the traditional response by saying, "Christ have mercy." To which I would usually respond by saying, "Lord have mercy on me!"

This sense of God's mercy is central, I think, to the Christian consciousness. We, among all people, are conscious that we have received God's mercy, and we are consciously grateful for it! And it is this sense of gratitude that fuels all aspects of our Christian discipleship. Without some sense of gratitude to God then we'll likely grow weary in well doing and give up on vital Christian living, by and by. That's why it's important, I think, to cultivate a grateful heart!

Well today is the first Sunday in our annual stewardship campaign and this year we have chosen the theme "With A Grateful Heart! Praising God, Loving Neighbor, Giving Generously!" In the past few months our stewardship team has reminded us that we are called to give our time, talent, and treasure for the glory of God, the good of our neighbors, and the enrichment of our own souls. In this series, we'll go to the root of all such giving – the root of gratitude – for there can be no fruit without a healthy root. And there can be no robust giving of any kind without a grateful heart!

Of course, if we just pause to think about it then we'll realize we have much to be grateful for in life; in fact, we are surrounded on every hand by God's good gifts – both temporal and spiritual. But in this sermon series we'll focus more on the later gifts, those spiritual gifts that come to us from the generous hand of a very kind God, than the former gifts, those material gifts that come our way, because spiritual gifts can easily be overlooked in favor of the material blessings that fill our days.

So today we look at the first of those spiritual gifts – the gift of God's mercy. And to help us reflect on the mercy that we have received, we're going to look at the life of the apostle Paul – and the mercy he received – as an example of God's mercy on us all. And we're using Paul as our example because he himself said, "I received mercy, so that in me...Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life." (1 Tim. 1:16)

In today's reading from 1 Timothy 1:12-17, the apostle Paul describes who he was before he received God's mercy, who he became after he received that mercy, and the gratitude that this mercy produced in his heart. For the first words out of his mouth as he reflected on God's mercy were these: "I am grateful to Christ Jesus!" (1 Tim. 1:12)

So then, let's cultivate our own gratitude by reflecting on God's mercy as we look at Paul's example as described in our text. In 1 Timothy 1:12-17. Paul says, "I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Let's look first at who Paul was before he received the mercy of God. According to his own admission, he was "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence." (1 Tim. 1:13) He was a man who acted "ignorantly in unbelief." (1 Tim. 1:13) He was, by his own estimation, the foremost of sinners! (1 Tim. 1:15-16)

Now if you're familiar with Paul's story then you know that this is not an exaggeration of the case. In the New Testament book of Acts we read an account of Paul's life as written by Saint Luke. And we first meet Paul in the seventh chapter of that book. In that chapter, we read about the stoning of an early Christian leader named Stephen and Acts 7:58 says, "...the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul (Saul being Paul's pre-Christian name)." Then, Acts 8:1-3 adds this: "Saul approved of their killing (Stephen). (And) that day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison." Can you imagine it?

And there's more in that vein! Acts 9:1 says, "Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way (of Jesus Christ), men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." In Acts 9:21, Paul is described as "...the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked (Jesus') name." In Acts 22:4 and 16, Saint Paul made this confession: "I persecuted this Way (the Way of Christ) up to the point of death by binding both men and women and putting them in prison...in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in (Jesus)." And finally, in Acts 26:10-11, Paul testified against himself saying, "...this is

what I did in Jerusalem; with authority received from the chief priests, I not only locked up many of the saints in prison, but I also cast my vote against them when they were being condemned to death. By punishing them often in all the synagogues I tried to force them to blaspheme; and since I was so furiously enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities.”

Yes, Paul was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence who acted ignorantly in his unbelief. Indeed, he was the foremost of sinners! But “was” is the operative word. You see, something happened to Paul that changed his life. What was that something? Well, he received God’s mercy and God’s grace! And so he writes in our reading, and says: “I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has...appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy... and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” He who was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence became a servant of Christ, full to overflowing with faith in Christ and love for others!

My friends, mercy is God refusing to give us the evil we deserve. Grace is God giving us the good that we don’t! Paul had experienced both and was grateful for each! And this gratitude motivated his faithful and loving service to Christ and the Church until the end of his days! Indeed, aside from Jesus Christ himself, the apostle Paul did more for the cause of Christ than any other person in the whole of human history! All because he had received, and was grateful for, God’s mercy and God’s grace.

“So Preacher...what has that to do with me?” you may be asking. “After all,” you may be saying to yourself, “I’m not nearly as bad as that! I never stood by and watched as another was stoned to death. I never persecuted anyone for their beliefs. I never entered anyone’s home and drug them off to an unjust prison. I never made havoc of another’s life. I never gave anyone a beating, although there were a few folks I certainly thought deserved one! So what does any of this talk about Paul’s sin and God’s mercy have to do with me? I’m a pretty good guy or gal. At my worst I’m just a mediocre sinner; and at my best I’m a pretty good Joe or Gill!”

Looking out at you I’d have to say you’re probably right. You probably are only a mediocre sinner – though there’s not a lot of virtue in that! And you probably are a pretty good Joe or Gill – all things considered. But I’ve been in ministry long enough to know that some of the most decent and respectable people among us are sometimes hiding some of the deepest and darkest of secrets in the quiet closets of their private lives. And I’ve been in ministry long enough to know that just because a person is ignorant of their sin doesn’t mean that there’s not some evil eating away at their soul like a quiet cancer sometimes eats away at a person’s vitals even when they’re not aware that it’s even there. Like Paul, you may be sinning “ignorantly in unbelief” which means you need mercy and grace as much as the next woman or man. Fortunately, God is eager to give both!

And chances are you're either looking for grace and mercy now, or you've already received each and you know it! And that's why you're here on a sunny Sunday morning instead of at home or somewhere else enjoying this fine day. You're either wanting God's mercy and grace this morning, or you already have them and you've shown up one more time to thank God for them, and to get a little more of them! In either case, I assure you, there's mercy and grace aplenty for the taking! Just hold out your hands and open your heart and you will receive them!

Now all of this takes us back to the question you may have been asking yourself a few moments ago. "Preacher, what has all of this talk about Paul have to do with me?" Well, Paul held himself up as an example to encourage us in our faith. He said, "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life." In other words, if God could have mercy on, and give grace to, a first-class sinner like Paul, then surely he will have mercy on and give grace to mediocre sinners like you and me! Hallelujah!

And so, like Paul, our hearts should overflow with gratitude to the God of all mercy and grace. And like Paul, "(We should be) grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened (us) ... and appointed (us) to his service. And finally, like Paul we should break out in a paean of praise to this God of mercy and grace, saying, "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever." And all of God's grateful people said: Amen!

My friends, in the days ahead you'll be asked to pledge your time, your talent, and your treasure to the work of Christ through Mountain View. As you consider how you'll give, please remember the mercy and grace that you have received and continue to receive each day. And may all of your giving be rooted in a grateful heart. Amen.