

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Instructions to Timothy

Fight, Keep Fighting, Finish!

The Worst Sinner!



I can identify with Paul here – I really can! He was still amazed that God clearly chose him for the task of being an influential apostle, missionary pastor, church planter, and writer of scripture for the church! He obviously reveals in our text that, in his own estimation, he was certainly not worthy of that calling! I, too, am amazed that God has called me to serve Him in my calling as a pastor! I too am well aware of my shortcomings as a man, as a Christ-follower, and as a pastor. I am introspective, not because I want to be, but because I believe all Christ-followers must be. Sometimes our family history, the way our parents put us down, or belittled, or called us derogatory names, has given us something called low self-esteem. People with low self-esteem cannot handle criticism of any kind. Neither can they even criticize themselves. They cannot be introspective. They cannot admit that they were wrong or have **done** something wrong! They cannot apologize because that would force them to admit that they were wrong. It is a sad thing. Such a person will find it very difficult to follow Jesus or to truly apply the admonitions of the scriptures because one of its functions is to point out our flaws, shortcomings, and sins. A person with an underlying self-image problem that is undealt with, cannot see themselves in the description. An honest look inside would just hurt too much. **That** flaw is not my particular problem. My parents scolded and corrected me when I was wrong, and disciplined me for being naughty, but they were not mean about it. They were also good at building me up and praising me for the things I showed strength, talent, or good character in. What self-image problems I have had have been completely my own doing. It is a true thing that we **all** have self-image issues to varying degrees. It is part of the original curse and fall. It is part of our genetic memory from that catastrophic event! We need no one to teach us how to have a poor self-image. We can have low self-esteem even if we are spoiled with praise throughout our youth! That is because self-esteem is also built up or diminished by our choices that accumulate, and our many bad ones overwhelm our conscience with guilt, regret, self-recrimination, or just an undercurrent of an unrestful mind. I have enough self-esteem to know my flaws, shortcomings, and sins. I don't feel like they disqualify me from ministry or from heaven itself. I am forgiven! I know that I have been graced with God's mercy and His love! That love and mercy is based upon Christ's perfection, not mine. So I can rejoice, not in myself, but in my perfect Savior in whom I have security with God. I am "**in Christ**", and therefore God sees me through the cleansing prism of the perfect character of Jesus. If it were not so, I would have no hope whatsoever! But I am also committed to the Devine re-creative process. I am unsatisfied with remaining as I am! I intend to continue to grow into this grace by which I am saved! It is what I want **more than anything!**



Paul exposes his regrets about Himself here in our text in a way that he never has before anywhere else in his writings. He is not shy about who he has been and how bad that was! He was an extreme enemy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He had been a Jew of Jews and a fanatical follower of the Mosaic Law. As such, He viewed the Gospel and its adherents as an anathema to God – that God must hate Christians and their message, because it was a threat to Judaism! He did not know that within God’s plan of salvation history, the Mosaic Law was a stopgap measure – a foothold in the world until God could come and take care of things personally in the form of His Son, Jesus, the Christ/or Promised One of God! So Paul had been a traveling henchman, a spiritual bounty hunter with one type of target within the borders of Israel - hunting down Christian leaders, harassing the church, stressing out everyone in the church that knew of him! His name had been Saul then, and now he looked back with great regret on the life of Saul! It was like another life – a different man – by this time! After his encounter with Christ in his Toyota Land Rover on the dusty road to Damascus, he had seen that in fighting against Jesus, he had been sinning greatly against the God he thought he had been so vigorously defending! He realized that he had had a prophetic-type encounter with God, on par with the prophets of the Old Testament, **[Acts 9:3-9/Daniel 10:7-9]** and he was shocked by this development/revelation, and his heart crumbled into the wreckage of guilt and self-recrimination. In one all-too-swift moment, he had gone from feeling righteous to feeling like the king of sinners, and at a certain level it had stuck with him! By this time, Paul was no longer the king of sinners, as Christ had radically changed his heart and his perspective and,.. well,.. his whole life! But sometimes He felt like he owed Christ so much, because Christ was responsible for God not holding Paul accountable for his former cruelty to Christians! Even though he knew he was forgiven and under the grace of God, he still heard the frightened screams of the women – wives and daughters of some of the men he had burst in on and arrested! He still felt the suffering of the men he had hauled to prison! He knew these righteous men had moldered away for months or even years in their dark, foul-smelling, verminous, rat-infested jail-cells – and for what?! For faithfully following the true Messiah of Israel and Savior of the entire world! They had been in the right and he had been entirely in the wrong! The fact that he was the cause of so much pain and suffering to the people he now identified with, loved, and served, hurt Paul, but it also motivated Him and energized Him to turn and to **serve** the cause of Christ faithfully and with more zeal than he had ever had in his opposition to Christ!



He was also motivated by gratitude to God for not using the divine finger to flick him into the dust for his impudence. He had such a strong sense that God had shown great mercy to Him in **calling** Him instead of **killing** him! [Vs. 14]. Paul considered himself the poster boy for God's grace! He, who had distinguished himself as the greatest sinner among the vast hordes of sinners (the way Paul thought of himself) had received an abundance of "**grace**", unlimited "**patience**", and an abundance of "**love**" and "**faith**"! He received all these infinitely rich spiritual gifts when he gave Himself to Jesus! He had found them "in Christ", a spiritual state of being that he writes of extensively elsewhere in his writings! Previous to that, his spiritual journey had been one marked by the severities of hatred and judgment! That could not be a part of the second half of his journey! Hatred and judgment have no part of Christ! We may hate the sin, but we cannot hate the sinner - we are bound over to our commitment to love God and to love our neighbor! Since Christ came to save sinners, there is no way that we can do anything but to cooperate with His agenda! He has sent out His followers to seek and to save those who have been lost to God – lost causes! No one in the church ever thought that Paul would come around full circle and renounce his cruelty – renounce his terrible mission in life to eradicate the church! If there EVER was a lost cause, as far as conversion to Christ was concerned, Paul was THAT lost cause! That is why, when he actually **did** come to Christ, no one believed it at first. Everyone in the church suspected that it was just a ruse for Paul to get in close in the church so that he might round up even more of the Christians in his cruel net of psychological warfare and treachery! Eventually, they had begun to come out of the shadows to examine Paul to see if what they had heard was indeed real! And then they began to rejoice in the grace and power of Christ as they finally saw that Paul was wonderfully converted to Christ and had made a 180 degree turnaround in his life and focus. He was now **FOR** Christ rather than against Him! Then the religious authorities that had been sending and paying Paul to catch Christians and bring them in, began to hear rumors of Paul's conversion. It was as hard for them to believe the story as it was for the Christians. So for a short time, Paul was in a bleak transitional state of living in "no man's land" - that beat up, bombed out, shot up strip of land between to opposing armies where not one dares to go! He didn't belong anywhere – that is, until the apostles finally met with him and embraced his conversion story of how Christ had miraculously appeared and had spoken with him in his Land Rover on the dusty road to Damascus



The **"example"** that God makes of Paul is a glorious one! The conversion and saving of Paul is for the encouragement of others down the road, who would be making a crossroads decision of whether to follow Christ or not. Many would come to that place of decision, and in anguish of heart conclude that they have lived too bad of a life – that God cannot possibly forgive them for all their offenses, sins, and trespasses against God and humanity! God's example of gracious forgiveness for someone that was obviously such a lost cause as Saul, would stand forever as a monument to the truth that He can and will forgive **anyone** who truly and sincerely asks Him for forgiveness - **ANYONE!** I have to say that most "lost causes" ARE lost causes to the gospel. The percentage of people that are willing to give Jesus their heart is quite small – less than one percent I would say. But the percentage of those that have done terrible things in their lives is (in my experience) far less than even that miniscule percentage. Men like John Newton - just a piece of human garbage, a slave trader who was wonderfully saved and who later wrote the song "Amazing Grace"! Jihadists from the Muslim faith, hateful assassins and killers, have come to Christ in a wonderful transformative faith! Prostitutes, hardened by years of abuse, being used, and by a life of betrayal, of using and being used, have finally had enough and given themselves to Jesus, who has changed them completely and restored life to them, including them in a life of service to Christ – often among those still caught in an evil lifestyle! There have been movie stars and rock stars with their multiple marriages and promiscuous and self-indulgent lifestyles who have come to the precipice of despair, and then they gave their life to Jesus who wonderfully saved them to Himself and literally saved their lives! There have been mass murderers, and serial killers that have genuinely found Christ while on death row, and who we will see in heaven one day! Atheists, abortionists, homosexuals, heavily tattooed Satanists, gang leaders and members involved in the drug industry, murder, extortion, and terror! And Jesus gave them a new life too, and they were able to renounce and extricate themselves from their old life and enter into a new Christ-centered life a to serve Him well! Admittedly, there's not many, percentagewise, but there are enough to show all that there is hope even for the lost causes!



On the opposite end of the spectrum, it is just as hard and unusual for a religious person who is devout, who considers themselves *“righteous”*, or at least *“not that bad”* to give their lives over to Jesus. They like their Jesus on the side. Jesus at the center is too much Jesus! Only the weirdo, fanatical, Bible-believing, evangelizing, spiritual-right-wing Christians talk about giving **everything** to Jesus! Well, these “Christians” don’t want to be like “those” Christians! It is unbelievably hard for such a person to ever get to the point of surrender to Christ, and if there is no surrender, no centralization of Jesus, there is no salvation – no hope of heaven awaiting them! Then a person is hoping their church and its rituals can pull it off! Well, they can’t! Many churches say that they can, but they cannot! Jesus said that there are two important commands that He insists upon – **“Love the Lord God with heart, soul, and mind”**, and **“love your neighbor”**. Truly loving your neighbor comes out of Loving God with everything you are! If you do not want that, then you cannot have Jesus until you do! This is why Jesus went to those who **knew** that they were sinners! **“Come unto me all you who are weary and weighed down** (weighed down by life, by your guilt, by your regrets, by your bad choices, by your life philosophy and world view which have been disastrous, etc., etc...), **and I will give you rest”**, He said. Only someone sick to the soul for their sins, mistakes, wrong turns, dead ends, can know how much they need the grace and mercy of God! Only someone honest enough, and courageous enough to face themselves can come to Christ! And once a person comes to Christ, and are in Christ, then we have to **keep on** coming face to face with ourselves, for we have layer upon layer of self-deceit to uncover and break through! Paul knew it and did not hesitate to call himself **“the worst of sinners”**. In facing up to it, we experience the joy of divine love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness that we might confess it, apologize to God for it, and have Him rid us of it! This is an essential first step in following Jesus and being a part of His new creation! This is how we grow and change to become ever more like Jesus and to reflect His character rather than our own!

