

My faith his faithfulness

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1 Tim 1:12-20

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Introduction

Last Sunday we began this sermon series in which we are going through Paul's first letter to Timothy. What I find so appealing about this pastoral letter from the great Apostle Paul to his young protégé Timothy, is that it gives us a window into what I believe is of central importance at this time in terms of what God is putting before us as a church – namely discipleship.

The call has always been there for us to make disciples. But I believe that this is particularly pertinent to us at this time as we look at Growing the Church through Connect groups.

Essentially disciples making is about relationships, and we get further in sight into that in tonight's reading. But we saw last week the warmth of the relationship between Paul and Timothy – whom Paul describes (vs. 2) as ...

“my true son in the faith”.

In 1 Cor 4:17 he refers to him as

“my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord”

and when he writes to the Philippians (2:22) he says of him

“Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel”.

And we saw last week how he jumps right in and addresses one of the pressing issues Timothy is facing in Ephesus as he seeks to correct false teaching. Paul gives him specific instruction about the wrong and the right use of the law – the written word of God. And we drew some lessons from that.

It was a tough call. It was a demanding and tricky situation. Timothy was there for a purpose and Paul wants to keep him focussed and on track with the task at hand.

Now moving on to the he does some self disclosure. He gives Timothy a window into how he Paul sees and understands himself.

This is a key factor in the work of making disciples. We need to know who we are and what God has done in us. For making disciples is not about teaching a course or giving instructions. It is about sharing your life and walk with the Lord with another. It is allowing others to learn from your walk and journey of faith.

So in these few verses we look at tonight Paul speaks about four things:-

- What he had been;
- How he received mercy:
- Why God had mercy on him.
- And then fourthly invites Timothy to respond and make some choices.

So first – what Paul had been

Note first that Paul's self disclosure **begins with thanks** and **ends with worship**.

12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service.

17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

To be disciple makers we need to live lives of thanksgiving and praise. Why? Because thanksgiving and praise keep us focused on God, and the point of making disciples is to see them grow in Jesus, not into our image. We are not trying to impart life skills to them. We are trying to connect them to Jesus and see his life released in them.

To do that, we need to be always aware of Jesus life in us, with frequent expressions of thanks and praise.

Paul gives thanks for three things:

- God has given him strength.
- God has considered him faithful. (He regarded him and treated him as trustworthy. That was God's attitude towards him.)
- He appointed him to serve.

What three things do you want to thank God for?

What has, and is, Jesus doing in you?

So getting back to our first point then - what Paul had been.

In verse 13 he describes himself in three ways.

I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man,

He spoke evil of Jesus and tried to force others to do the same and to this end he used violence.

When he was giving his defence before King Agrippa in Acts 26 he says ...

9 "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

10 And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.

11 Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

Now before we tut tut and shake our heads at how bad Paul was and rest on the fact that we have never been to those lengths – the word translated as “violent man” is a combination of words meaning “arrogant” and “uncaring”. He got to where he was and did the things he did because of ...

Arrogance – *“I know better. I am above this. I am better.”*

And because of an ...

Uncaring attitude – *“These people don’t count. Their pain and distress is of no concern to me.”*

Watch out for that attitude or the seeds of it. It can get a grip on us and take us where it took Paul.

That is who Paul had been.

Would you note that he does not dwell on it and spell out all the gory detail as he writes to Timothy, but neither does he deny his past. He owns what he was. He does not allow Timothy to think for one moment that he Paul had a stain free track record.

As we make disciples there is an example to follow. As we sow into the lives of others there is a place for honest self disclosure that does not wallow in muck of the past and in a self indulgent way spell out the sordid details, but honestly acknowledges that we have failed.

So reflect on this:

What and how do you share from your past with those who you are seeking to disciple?

How do you strike a balance between being honest and transparent without being self indulgent and drawing unhelpful attention to your self?

So firstly – what Paul had been. Now Paul describes for Timothy ...

Secondly - how he had received mercy

Twice (vs. 13 and 16) he uses the phrase ...

“I was shown mercy”

Verse 14 is rich in expansive imagery.

The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

He NRSV reads ..

and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me

The Messages reads ...

Grace mixed with faith and love poured over me and into me. And all because of Jesus.

Grace is like a river that has burst its banks and carries all with it sweeping irresistibly on bringing, not devastation, but the blessing of faith and love.

Some time ago Alexa Russell left the staff team, and as a farewell gift she treated us to a day canoeing down the Breede River. She was a river guide and arranged the day for us. The trouble was that there had heavy rains the river was in flood. We went anyway. Mistake!

Suffice it to say, I am glad we are here to tell the tale. The canoe I was in over turned and got caught beneath the water up against a tree. There was absolutely no way we could ever get that canoe free. The guides tried but said that we would have to abandon it and when the water subsided it would get washed down stream and would pick up the pieces.

On the surface the water looked calm and inviting. The river was flowing, full of life and the water sparkling in the morning sunlight. But the power of that water was amazing. Three meters of water, 20 meters wide washing down the stream. It was unstoppable.

Paul says

The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

I was over come. (He was literally – you can read about it in Acts 9 and Acts 22). He was powerless to resist. The grace and mercy of God were relentless.

With that image of grace and mercy and love and faith being poured out in him Paul gives the first of five “Trustworthy sayings” that come up in his letters to Timothy and Titus.

Verse 15

15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst.

There are three things to note.

First: The Gospel is true and can be trusted.

In contrast to the controversial speculations, myths, endless genealogies, and the lies and propaganda of the false teachers mentioned in verse 4, the content of the Gospel is true and trustworthy.

The gospel of Christ is not based on speculation and myth, but on fact. The historic veracity of the gospel narrative can be tested. There is witness to the power of the gospel to change lives. This is not a whimsical “feel good”

idea that some one dreamed up. It is based on the verifiable intervention of God in history.

Second: What is that gospel? Christ came to save sinners.

Jesus did not come to bring condemnation. He came to bring release from the bondage of sin. He came to release captives.

I mentioned last week that I was in a social conversation with some one I had not seen for a while, and after enquiring about the children, and work, the house, etc, I said, "And so how our things on the spiritual front?" She said "Oh I have been very bad about coming to church" and she put out her hand in a playful gesture for a smack.

It was a light moment. But you know it reveals what many of us feel deep down about God. He is there to judge us; he is there to chastise us, and to point out our sins. To remind us of how bad we are.

We think that John 3:17 reads ...

God sent his Son into the world to condemn the world.

That is wrong!

17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Jesus said to the women caught in adultery

"Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Jesus came to set us free from being held in captive by sin.

I am becoming more and more aware of how many people live captive to fear, captive to lies they believe about themselves and about God.

When we believe a lie instead of believing God's truth, that is sin.

When walk in fear, instead of in the glorious freedom of the children of God; that is sin.

When I am living in destructive patterns of behaviour that alienate me from others and God; that is sin.

Sin separates us from God, from others, from ourselves.

*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance:
Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*

Jesus came not for condemnation but for liberation. That is the truth. That is the gospel.

Third: It is personal.

Paul adds –

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst.

Did he mean this literally? Common sense tells us that we are not to take this a statement of scientific fact. Paul had not investigated the criminal and sinful records of all the known inhabitants of the world at that time, carefully compared himself with them, and concluded that he was worse than them all.

The point is that we move beyond wanting to make comparisons. Aware of the flood of God's grace that is so overwhelming, and of God's desire to set us free from everything that holds us in bondage, who wants to pretend they don't need his release, or need it less than anyone else.

If God is about releasing people from sin, if God is setting people free from stuff that bedevils us, I want to be at the front of the queue.

Jesus told the story of two men going to pray and the one, a religious official, saying ...

'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

But the other one, the tax collector, said ...

'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

And he concluded saying it was that one who went home right with God.

This trust worthy saying is true, Jesus came to save sinners and set them free, and you need to embrace it personally. It is for you.

Friends if we are making disciples, we need to know ourselves as those who desperately need the grace and mercy of God as much, if not more, than anyone else. We need to see ourselves as those needing salvation – needing to be set free – needing to be released from stuff in our lives that keeps us living in the shadows, living on half throttle.

I don't know about you but I want to be disciplined by some one who knows their need of God and who is finding new freedom in their walk with God.

Do you know that Jesus came to set you free? That is the truth. That is a trustworthy saying and you need to grasp it personally. You can do that tonight.

Thirdly – Paul speaks about why God had mercy on him

The answer to that question is threefold.

First God had mercy on him because God is merciful. That is the nature of God. For him not to be merciful would for him to deny himself.

Later on in the Communion service we will say the words in what is called the Prayer of Humble Access ...

We are not worthy to gather up the crumbs under your table,

but you are the same Lord whose nature is always to have mercy

But here Paul points to two other reasons why God had mercy on him.

Verse 13:

I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.

His ignorance was not an excuse. It did not give him a claim on God's mercy. It did not make God more disposed to him than he would have otherwise.

But as Paul says else where (Acts 22:3 and Acts 26:9) that he was zealous but ignorant, convinced that he should do all things possible to oppose the name of Jesus.

His ignorance does not excuse him. But God sees the heart that is zealous for him and knocks him off his feet with a flood and deluge of grace and mercy.

At this time Moslems are keeping Ramadan and Jewish people are celebrating Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year). For both our Jewish and Moslem friends and neighbours this is a time when many are zealously seeking God. This is a time for us to be praying for a flood gate of mercy and grace to knock them off their feet and bring them to a life changing encounter with God.

God had mercy on Paul because of his ignorance and unbelief.

The other reason Paul says he was shown mercy was so that it would be an example and encouragement to others.

Verse 16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

When people saw that God could have mercy on some one like Paul after all that he had done, the message would be loud and clear.

"Don't despair. Jesus had mercy on me, the worst of sinners, he will surely have mercy on you too!"

This just underlines the importance of honest sharing of our lives with those we disciple. As we allow them to see into our lives and with honesty own what we are and what we have done, then we can point all the more to the grace and mercy of God at work in us releasing us from sin and bringing us to live free in Jesus.

Living thankfully with this awareness of what God has done in our lives – of where we have been, of how we have received mercy, fuels the desire to see others come to believe in him and receive eternal life – meaning not just a life in the here after, but life fully lived now in the freedom that Jesus brings.

No wonder he breaks into praise:

17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

So in the task of making disciples we learn from Paul's example the importance and value of sharing our lives honestly with those we are seeking to disciple and grow in the Lord. We are not teaching a course or giving instructions.

We are sharing our lives. Honestly owning our past without going into self indulgent wallowing in the muck, we can point to the overwhelming grace and mercy of God and what he has done in us, owning the fact that we are desperately in need of his grace.

Stories told, book-marked between thanksgiving and praise, will have the focus on Jesus. That is where we want the emphasis.

I don't want to disciple some one to do what I did. I want to put them in touch with, and alert them to, what Jesus is doing in them. That will transform them and take further and lead them to do greater things (as Jesus said of his disciples).

Conclusion

Now in conclusion Paul having set before Timothy the example of the false teachers (which we looked at last week) and now his own example, he says in effect to Timothy...

"Make a choice young man. You can not remain neutral. You can not sit in the fence. You may be young, inexperienced and retiring, but you need to be decisive."

And in these last three verses there are **three verbs** he uses as he instructs Timothy.

The first is = Remember

The word "remember" does not appear in the text as such but the essence of what he says is "remember the calling on your life".

18 Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that following them ...

We don't know what the prophecies were exactly, but the context indicates that he was commissioned, ordained and set apart for ministry.

Remember your calling.

In making disciples we need to remind one another of our calling not only in terms of the ministry we exercise but who God has called us to be.

A while ago some one very helpfully came to me after what I heard you say I need to remind you, Duncan, that you were not called to walk in fear.

The second word is = Fight

Fight the good fight

We tend to shy away from militaristic language. But the Scripture does not have this reticence. There is battle on and we kid ourselves if we feel we will be excused from it.

Timothy was not going to sort out the problems in the churches in Ephesus with out a struggle. The false teachers and those spreading myths and speculations were not going to just disappear. He would need to take them on.

One of the things coming against us in the task of making disciples is passivity - thinking that it will just happen, that we will bump into some one and they will ask us a leading question and we will just sort of fall into it. No! We need to be intentional about making disciples, and going to people and taking initiative and doing it. The fight is on. We need to enter the battle.

The third word is = Hold on

“Hold on” or “hold fast” to faith and a good conscience.

It suggest a firm conscious intentionally grasping. This is no casual after thought. No optional extra. This is a steely determination to put heart and soul into taking this seriously.

Jesus said, *“But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”* (Matt 24:13)

Beginnings are important but it is finishing well that counts.

So Timothy had to make an informed choice:

He had to **look back** at the call that he had had received. He had to remember.

He had to **look to the present** moment and enter the fray and fight the battle that needing fighting now.

And he had to **look to the future** recognising that he would have to hold on until the end.