

Jesus Appoints the Worst of Sinners!

A sermon on 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you've ever had the experience of hiring someone for a job before, you know everything that goes into appointing the right person. You check their credentials. You pore over the resume. You assess their skills. There's the interview, maybe even second and third rounds of interviews. And then, you might have the probationary period, kind of a trial period for the applicant, to see how he/she will mesh with the other employees, how they'll fit in with the dynamic of the company. It could all be a very intense process.

Or...maybe you've been on the other side of the desk, the one looking for the job, being, in a sense, thrown through the ringer, with all the nerves and apprehension, all of it, looking to have the right person for the job.

Jesus is looking to hire. He wants people who can carry out his Great Commission, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...teaching them." Are you up for the task? He's not just hiring anyone, and yet, Christ Appoints the Worst of Sinners! Jesus appoints you!

Well, I guess there really is no beating around the bush here. Do those two statements make you feel uncomfortable, that Christ appoints the worst of sinners and Christ appoints you? Those two statements are true, aren't they? That Jesus has appointed, or chosen you and me to be his messengers, what a great privilege and an honor. But what's not so great? That you and I are the worst of sinners.

Now before you go and get your feathers all ruffled over that accusation, that Pastor would have the audacity to make that claim for me and everyone else here today, consider Paul.

You know the apostle Paul, don't you? The man who wrote nearly half of the New Testament. The man who has so clearly understood and conveyed the message of God's grace and loving forgiveness to us in Scripture. The man who was the apostle of apostles, the one who took Jesus' command to "go" and ran with it, going to the ends of the earth. The man who first reached out to the Gentiles, the supposed heathens, giving them the gospel.

The man who endured far more persecution for the sake of Jesus, far more than we will ever face in our lives, such as he tells us, "I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. 24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. 27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked," and so on.

If ever there was an evangelist or even a Christian you would want to emulate, Paul was it. An inspiring example to every believer.

But that's not how he saw himself. You see, Paul considered himself to be no different from you and me. In this letter to Timothy, he wasn't afraid to call himself what he really was, the worst of sinners. Or, that word for "worst" in the Greek is "first." Paul was calling himself the first sinner, as in, he would put himself at the top of the list, the first in line deserving God's eternal wrath and punishment.

But why? With such a great man who did such great things for the Lord? Why the worst? He wasn't exaggerating. Paul convicts himself in our verses, "I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man."

He tells us more about his troubles, his rap sheet, in the book of Acts, "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 Lord's people 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. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities."

You see, there was a time when Paul not only hated the name of Jesus and hated anyone who was his follower, but he did all he could to wipe out any semblance of Jesus, even if it meant putting Christians to death. You see that hatred that used to burn in Paul, and maybe he was right. Maybe he was the worst of sinners.

But is he the only one who deserves that distinction, the worst of sinners? If Jesus is looking for someone to carry out his work here on earth, and you're up for the interview, how does your resume look?

Well, you know, God's first requirement is perfection, right? Doesn't he say, "Be holy, because I the LORD, your God, am holy"? And, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"?

"Well, that's kind of unfair, isn't it? No one's perfect. That's an unrealistic expectation. I can't go a single day without sinning, no matter how hard I try, and believe me, I try hard to be good. Shouldn't that be good enough for God?"

Or, maybe it's this thought, "Well, ok, I sin, I'm not perfect but come on, God used Paul, and well, you've seen the kind of man Paul was. I don't persecute others like Paul did. I'm respectful of others, and you know, it doesn't matter what their lifestyle is, I'm tolerating of them. And where Paul pretty much breathed hatred, not me. Love everyone, that's my motto. Don't judge. So yeah, compared to Paul, my application's looking pretty good, God, doesn't it?"

And yet, compared to God's standards for the job, to be his child and his messenger, and for the reward, heaven, it doesn't matter whether we're comparing ourselves to Paul before his conversion by God or by unbelieving Joe Schmoe down the street. We can fluff it up all we want, and march our good deeds

before God, but it's not perfection, and it's not good enough. And if we're not the best, we're the worst.

I mean, who of us can't consider ourselves to be the "worst" of sinners, with the guilt and shame of our open sins, the sins we put on display for all to see. But even more embarrassing...are the sins I keep hidden, that no one else can see. If only they knew what I really thought of their kids. If only my friend really knew I was still angry at her for that one time. If only my boss knew how lazy I am at work, mentally checking out after lunch. If only Pastor knew the real reasons why I only occasionally come to church, or really don't care to be at Bible Class or other church functions.

If only God knew the unbelief in which I act when I commit those sins time and time again. But he knows. He sees. And for those who deserve to be thrown off the cliff into the eternal fires of hell, I deserve to be first in line, and you do too, standing right next to Paul. We really are the worst of sinners, aren't we?

But "here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst."

You know, when you read through these verses from 1 Timothy, I hope that's the passage that sticks out to you. Paul even emphasizes it by calling it a "trustworthy saying." Every word in that phrase "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst"...every word is pregnant with meaning. Every word could contain a sermon of its own.

For us, the worst of sinners, Christ came. Christ, the eternal Son of God promised long ago as the Messiah.

For us, the worst of sinners, Jesus came. Jesus, true man, the Son of Mary, so named "because he will save his people from their sins."

For us, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus came, sent by his Father but willingly leaving the glory he had in heaven to come into the world, where he humbly placed himself under the law and was tempted as we are. Jesus, who humbled himself even lower than that, being obedient even to a humiliating death on the cross.

And why he did all that? So that for us, the worst of sinners, he would save us. That was his one great goal and accomplishment, which, as Jesus said in our gospel, was to "seek and save what was lost."

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. That is the epitome of God's grace, his undeserved and unending love for us, the worst of sinners. That for us, who are the worst, God showed mercy and poured out his grace in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, just as he did with Paul, so that now we are the first, not of sinners, but of those who are deserving of eternal life in heaven.

You know, when God looks at our resume, he doesn't see the sin smeared all over the application. Instead, he sees the cross, and because of Jesus, he sees perfection. He considers us faithful.

And because of that, the job is ours. God appoints us to his service. Paul writes about this very thing, saying, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord...that he considered me faithful...I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.

Now understand, Paul wasn't excusing his sins, saying God forgave him and showed him mercy as a result of his faithfulness or even because he was such an ignorant unbeliever. He realized it was because of nothing but the grace of God that God showed his unlimited patience and saved him and appointed Paul to be God's mouthpiece. And what an incredible privilege it was for him.

The same is true for us. There is nothing in us that God should deem desirable for making use of to spread the gospel. And yet here we are, the worst of sinners, yet cleansed, forgiven, saved, appointed by Jesus and sent out to share the abundance of his grace with others.

And so, what else can we do but go?! You know, you might not be a natural as sharing your faith, like Paul was. I mean, he only had to step into a town, and it wasn't long before news of his arrival had spread and the people flocked to him to hear the gospel.

You may have a more obstinate crowd, unwilling to listen. You might have those who work to undermine your message with their jeers and their putdowns. You might not even get an overly enthusiastic response whenever you talk about Jesus with a friend or someone you know who desperately needs him in their life.

But take heart and keep up the work. The gospel is a tough message to share with those who don't want to hear it. But it's the most important news there is, life-changing news for all, even for us who were, too, at one time, the worst of sinners. But in his grace, Jesus has appointed you to this all-important position. And you could find every excuse not to go. But there's no better way to thank him for this work than to faithfully do it. So we do. And Jesus will take care of the results. Praise God for that. Amen.

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