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The Christian's Autobiography.

Text: 1 Tim 1:12-17

Suggested Hymns:
158, 170, 802LSB, 290, 163

1) The first among sinners
2) The first among the pardoned

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is 1 Timothy 1:12–17, ***12 And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, 13 although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. 14 And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.***

15 This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. 16 However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

What an interesting autobiography Paul could have written toward the close of his life! His conversion, his stay in Arabia, his marvellous revelations, the contacts with the influential men of his day, his influence on the political, social, and religious life, his conflict with the representatives of every theological and philosophical school of his time, — all this would have been material for one of the world's most interesting biographies.

But Paul has little to say about himself in our letter, about. A. D. 63, and in his last letter to Pastor Timothy he refers to such seemingly unimportant matters as a cloak to keep him warm, a few books and parchment to read while in prison.

It is strange that there seems to be so much to say when the Christian comes to the end of the road. But it can be said very briefly. In the light of eternity so many things which seemed all-important in former years dwarf into insignificance.

In fact, Paul and all Christians can sum up their entire lives in two short sentences, yes, in two short words: sin and grace.

Some day your and my obituary will be read. But it is not what people say that will count. God will write an inscription for our tombstone. However, God's inscription on the unbeliever's monument will be very brief, only: "Lost."

May God grant that the central theme of your biography will be God's grace. Our text unfolds the Christian life, and very appropriately brings a song of praise for God's infinite mercy.

Let us consider today the two important doctrines of sin and grace. May we learn to know our sin in its true character and in its dreadful consequences. But let us also learn to understand ever more fully the infinite greatness of God's mercy. May we at all times seek refuge in His mercy for Jesus' sake.

Our theme is *Two Statements which Sum Up the Christian's Entire Life*. Firstly, The first among sinners, and secondly, The first among the pardoned. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The First Statement Which Sum Up The Christian's Entire Life. The First Among Sinners

"I am chief among sinners," is the confession of the man whom we designate as Saint Paul. Are these the words of one who delights in boasting of previous sins? Certainly not! Paul was not the type of person who would share his thoughts, giving an account of every sin or wickedness, great or small, and laying bare the very crevices of one's soul. Such actions usually lead to a morbid view of sin.

It was not an easy matter for Paul to speak of his sins: ***blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man.*** His whole being shudders at the remembrance that there was a time when he spoke the vilest things against the name of his blessed Redeemer and compelled the Christians to do the same.

As he writes these words, he still sees the blood-stains of innocent martyrs on his hands. The cries of helpless women and children for mercy still reverberate in his ears. What havoc he had wrought in the Church![1]

We read in Acts 9:1–2, ***1 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.***

And in Acts 8:3, ***3 As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.***

The first chapter in Paul's life is scarlet with vile and gross sin of deepest colours. The memory of these years — some 30 years ago — is still so vivid that he exclaims: ***I am chief among sinners!*** This is a genuine, not a morbid, confession.

He repeatedly refers to his sin. For example in 1 Corinthians 15:9, ***9 For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.***

In Philippians 3:6, Paul admits that he was ***persecuting the church.*** And in Ephesians 3:8 we read, ***8 To me, who am less than the least of all the saints.***

But are the words in our text, ***I did it ignorantly in unbelief,*** not an attempt to excuse his sin, to find alleviating circumstances? True, Paul's training in his home and under Gamaliel kept him away from the promised Messiah, yes, and filled him with hatred against Christ.

Paul says in Acts 22:3–5, ***3 "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. 4 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, 5 as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.***

And we read in Galatians 1:13–14, ***13 For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and***

tried to destroy it. [14] And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

This was like the veil of Moses.[2] But Paul did not excuse this *"ignorance of Israel"* in others, nor did he excuse it in himself. On the contrary, he condemns ignorance and unbelief as in themselves damnable sins.

Paul had not acted against better knowledge. He was convinced of what he was doing. He had followed his conscience, misguided though it was, through ignorance and unbelief. That did not excuse what he had done. That did not make his actions any less wicked or his words any less blasphemous, but the Lord showed mercy on him in his ignorance and gave him enlightenment. The Lord broke through his unbelief and worked faith in his heart.

Paul cannot help marvelling at the full measure of God's grace: "***The grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant***." Paul's needs were great, but God's grace, the undeserved love that moved Him to reach out to Paul, was even greater, and more than enough. The well of God's grace does not run dry. A whole world of sinners does not exhaust it.

God ***desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.***[3] What a shame if we on our part place a limit on that boundless grace by our lack of mission zeal! God's grace came along "***with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus***." Faith and love accompany God's grace. By grace Paul was brought to faith in the Lord Jesus, and that resulted in love for God and for his neighbour.

Paul is <u>not</u> exalting himself as being better than, or at least not as bad as others. Paul is <u>not</u> offering his ignorance or unbelief as an extenuating circumstance. He obtained mercy because he ***did it ignorantly in unbelief*** [and because] ***the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant.***

Rather than finding an excuse we find the reason why Paul calls himself chief among the sinners. Spiritual ignorance and unbelief <u>cannot</u> be brushed aside, for unbelief is the damnable sin. At the bottom of his blasphemy was his unbelief.

In spite of his fine training in the Prophets, in spite of his acquaintance with the Christians and their testimony for Christ, he remained in stubborn unbelief

and would have remained in this dreadful condition if the merciful hand of God had not intervened. In all sincerity and honesty Paul confesses: *I am chief among sinners*.

That is a difficult confession to make. Every one of us is always ready to excuse, to minimise, and even to deny his sin. With a shrug of the shoulder and the pious phrase *"Oh, we are all sinners"* people try to dismiss their sin.

People so frequently measure themselves by a self-made standard, the behaviour of their neighbour. But when the Law of God brings home to us the grievousness of some specific, some pet sin, when from the knowledge of this one sin we are led to see the utter depravity of our nature, then we, too must confess: *"I am chief among sinners."*

Do not view your life in the light of your neighbour's conduct, but solely in the light of God's perfect will. Then you will realise and confess that you take the front rank among sinners. Have you made Paul's confession your honest confession?

Do not permit selfish pride to prevent you from confessing that Paul's statement sums up everything that you have contributed toward your life. But, thank God, there is another side to the Christian's life.

2. The Second Statement Which Sum Up The Christian's Entire Life.
The First Among The Pardoned

I am the chief among the pardoned. — How deep and unfathomable is the mercy of God, which makes the chief among sinners the chief among the pardoned!

There is only one way in which this is possible. ***[15] This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.*** Away with all modern theories of the atonement!

The redemption of our souls is so precious, the consequences of our sins so great, the wrath of God so fierce, that only God's own Son could redeem us. Man's guilt is so enormous that only the pardoning love of God in Christ Jesus can cancel it.

Man's heart is so rebellious that only God's power through the Gospel can convert man. Only the infinite grace of God can engender faith and love and make Paul a pardoned sinner.

When Paul views what the grace of God has wrought in him, he exclaims: ***for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.***

To me, as the first and foremost mercy was shown. He sees himself on the way to Damascus, and the persecutor becomes an apostle. Would it have been unjust, if a fate similar to that of Korah, who spoke against Moses and was swallowed up by the ground[4] had been Paul's fate? Certainly Not! But all sins are forgiven.

This deep love has also made you the chief among the pardoned. Did not sin abound in your life? But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.[5]

The hymnist wrote,[6]

O the height of Jesus' love!
Higher than the heavens above,
Deeper than the depths of sea,
Lasting as eternity;
Love that found me—wondrous thought!
Found me when I sought Him not.

You should feel yourself included in this unfathomable mercy of God. The mercy of God is also all-embracing, ***as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.*** No sinner is too great. Paul's life, first in sin and first in mercy, is a wonderful pattern for every believer. Because God pardoned Paul, He will also pardon you.

The mercy of God is so far-reaching, that it pardons the vilest of sinners. The inscription on monument of Copernicus reads: *"Not the grace shown to Paul, not the mercy to Peter, I request, but only that which You showed to the criminal on the cross."* In reality it is a confession: I am the greatest sinner, but also: I am the greatest among the pardoned. This is a beautiful confession of God's all-embracing mercy, which has also found me, and cleansed me.

Paul's life finally is an example of the completeness and fullness of God's mercy. Paul has the assurance that he is chief among the pardoned, for the Lord has put him into His service. Our text says, ***because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry***.

The Lord blots out sins completely. Not only is the pardon full, but the Lord places confidence in the pardoned. No matter what his life has been before; when the Christian is pardoned, then the past is forgotten, the future is bright.

Are you the chief among the pardoned? Can you sing with the hymnist:

> Chief of sinners though I be,
> Jesus shed His blood for me,
> Died that I might live on high,
> Lived that I might never die;
> As the branch is to the vine,
> I am His and He is mine.

May we all now live only to the glory of Jesus Christ who has changed and transformed us from the chief among sinners to the chief among the pardoned.

Let us join the Apostle in his doxology:

[17] Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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[1] Acts 8:3
[2] 2 Cor. 3:13
[3] 1 Timothy 2:4
[4] Numbers 16:31
[5] Romans 5:20
[6] Hymn 170 v 2