

Title: The “used to be” club
Text: 1 Timothy 1.12-17
Theme: Christ Jesus saves really bad sinners
Series: I Timothy #5
Prop Stmtnt: Christ saved the biggest enemy of the church and turned him into its greatest soldier.

Read Text:

Followers of Christ are being told that we are on the wrong side of history. When you look at the cultural trends, things do not look very good for us. But, when you look back over 2,000 years you could basically say the same thing. We are always on the wrong side of history, until we aren't. In other words, just when things look really bad, something very unexpectedly happens. It all started one Sunday morning when things were looking really bad for the 11 remaining disciples. Their leader was crucified and the 11 were reeling from his death and the knowledge that one of their own had betrayed him. Besides that, each man, including Peter, had to face the fact that no one really manned-up. So, here they were, confused, defeated, discouraged, and fearful. They appeared to be on the wrong side of history. And then, what happened? The resurrection happened and suddenly, they weren't on the wrong side of history anymore.

What do you do when you crucify your enemy and he rises again from the dead? Well, if you have any sense, you change sides! If you don't have any sense, you double-down. Enter Saul, stage right. This man was a one-man wrecking machine. Armed with authority from the Sanhedrin, Saul began an assault on the early believers that was terrifying. No Christ-follower was going to be safe and once again, it looked as if Christ followers were on the wrong side of history. Then, what happened? Saul was hijacked. The guy was taken out. On the road to Damascus, Saul was completely unexpectedly assaulted in a surprise attack. It's not that a band of Christians hid behind some bushes, waylaid him and threatened him with his life. Oh no, Jesus himself appeared to Saul and did something greater; he hijacked his heart.

Imagine if Jim Harbaugh resigned this week as the coach of Michigan and then went and joined Urban Meyer and the Ohio State Football program as the offensive coordinator. Some of you would be so totally stunned; you would think that the earth had somehow become unhinged from its axis, right? Now you can only begin to imagine the loss of Saul to the other side. If you are a member of the Pharisees, how do you get your mind around this? Did the guy jump sides for the money? Ok, that's laughable. Did he do it for the prestige? Comfort? Power? Respect? Popularity? Look at what he signed up for; Beatings, stoning, prison, shipwrecks, riots, trials, threats, hunger, distress, abandonment and in the end, execution. Seriously, how do you explain Saul's changing sides? What could possibly be his motivation? There is only one explanation. Jesus! Jesus took on his church's biggest enemy and instead of killing him, he changed him. Acts 9.31 is evidence of the fact that his defection to Christianity so stunned the Pharisees that their persecution of the believers virtually stopped, at least for a bit. Beloved, it is still true. We are on the wrong side of history, until all of a sudden, we aren't. And then, it's over.

This morning, we are studying Paul's abbreviated testimony. He tells his conversion story a number of times in the Bible. It is pretty clear that he does not get tired of repeating it. If you have a cast on your leg, you get tired of telling people about the injury or surgery, but if Jesus hijacks your life, the story never gets old. Some of you who are feeling the weight of your body's aging process grieve over the loss of youth. But think of this. Every day, you are literally one day closer to seeing Jesus. You are also one day closer to hearing Paul tell this story. Don't worry; he won't get tired of telling it. It's just too good.

Let's make some general observations of the text. Did you pay attention when we read it? Did you read it last evening, or this morning before church? That is always helpful. Seriously, if your brain is still worried about your fantasy football team, or is still wrapped around the movie you finished watching at 1am, then of course you are going to drag in here and take forever to get focused on what matters. We struggle enough with focusing on what really matters, don't we. Arm yourself for the fight. If you would read the text on Saturday night before you go to bed and on Sunday morning before you come to church, your anticipation of our gathering would be so much different. What if, in the car, you had a brief conversation about, "what do you think Bob is going to say in the sermon today about this text?" When you do that, you are helping one another read your Bible and listen to sermons better. That is a great way for the word to reverberate in and through our lives. So, if you did that, you would notice a few things such as:

Paul specifically names his sin. He owns it. He grieves over it, even as he rejoices in his pardon. There is an emphasis on mercy, isn't there? There are some rich truths here, but notice the tone. Paul writes with a sense of being overwhelmed. And the reason I don't think he will ever get tired of telling the story is because he repeats himself here. He tells the story twice with a different emphasis. And of course, he makes much of Christ.

1. **The gospel is our story and our message.** (12-16)

One of the things that I want you to see from this text is how Paul explains his conversion in clear terms that help explain and define the gospel. We need to learn how to share our story of conversion in a way that explains the gospel and not just our experience. I get the sense that most of you embrace that. I get that sense when I am listening to people tell their story of conversion before they are baptized. It is like we are all hearing people talk about different circumstances and events, and we are interested in that, but what we are really waiting to hear is the gospel. We can't wait to hear that person confess their sin and profess that they trust in Christ alone to save them. For us, that's the drama! We don't care so much if you were trapped in homosexuality, pornography, alcoholism, abuse, addictions, lying, stealing, self-righteousness or pride. We sit on the edge of our seat wanting to know that you know Christ. When you explain the gospel, we rejoice. That is what Paul is doing here and that is how we should talk about our conversion.

A. **What we are saved from** (13)

Look at the different terms that Paul uses to describe what he used to be. He said that I was a blasphemer, meaning that he was pronouncing judgment in the name of God upon people, who were actually followers of God. He was presuming to speak in the name of God in an effort to justify his violence against them.

Paul confesses that he was a persecutor. In Acts 22.19, Paul confessed to Christ that he imprisoned and beat those who believed in Christ. Later in Acts 26 when Paul was talking about his conversion again he said, *“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem, I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”*

Insolence is not a term we tend to use, but it has the idea of an egregious disregard of the rights and dignity of others. Paul is describing himself as being completely calloused to the fact that he was killing dads and moms, terrorizing children, causing unspeakable trauma and devastation in their lives. He was an insolent opponent. He remembers the cries for mercy and the pleas for understanding that he ignored. The faces of those he killed and the children he orphaned would never leave his memory. And then, before he continues, he says, “But I received mercy.” This is amazing to Paul and to us. “I received mercy.” I received mercy even though I didn’t show any mercy. Receiving mercy when you don’t show any mercy is jaw-dropping, world-stunning, God-glorifying, gospel-driven mercy. There is no explanation for that other than our God is a God who is rich in mercy. He is so rich in mercy that he has enough mercy to wreck the cruelest heart. What did you “used to be”?

As Paul looks back on his life with a grief and even a measure of bewilderment about what he was thinking in search for a plausible explanation, he links the mercy of God to his ignorance and unbelief. In other words, he is saying that he was truly ignorant of the gospel. He was not doing these things because he knew exactly who Christ was, or what the gospel was, he was ignorant. Paul’s heart was cruel. It was hardened by unbelief, but it was not calloused by his repeated rejection of the gospel. He did not know.

Do you see what Paul is doing in this text? Do you see why Paul is telling his conversion story? He is applying what he just wrote about to himself. He is showing how he misused the law of God. He used his distorted misinterpretation of the OT as a reason to persecute and kill people. He knows, firsthand, the danger of misusing God’s Word. The law was given to expose sin and point to our need of Christ.

B. What we are saved by (14-16)

We are saved by the mercy of God. We are saved by the grace of God. The mercy and grace that were poured upon Paul were from God, through Christ. Ultimately, we are saved by Christ. This is how the letter began; remember? (1.2) He speaks of grace as God giving us what we do not deserve, as overflowing for him with the faith (belief) and love

that are in Christ Jesus. Notice the contrast. Before Christ he was a raging, hate-filled persecutor. Now, his life overflows with love. Before, his life was characterized by ignorant unbelief and now it is marked by faith. He not only believes, but his belief is in and from Christ. A radical change has taken place in this man.

Paul then uses what sounds like a grammatical formula. Notice how v.15 begins, “The saying is trustworthy.” This same phrase appears in 3.1; 4.9; 2 Tim. 2.11 and Titus 3.8. Paul is repeating a slogan that was shared by the early believers. It would be common to hear early Christians say, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” We ought to say that because Jesus said that about himself all the time. Was it a song they sung? Was it a phrase they repeated? Was it a truism that they used? Probably all of the above. Notice that this phrase speaks of the pre-existence of Christ. He came into the world. We know from the gospels that he came into the world from the Father. He was not a created being as the Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses allege. He is from God because he is God. And as God, he was born into this world as one of us, in order to live in our place and die in our place and in so doing, absorb upon himself all of the wrath that we deserved. Christ Jesus came into this world in order to save sinners. Sinners cannot be saved any other way. But when Christ saves a sinner, he saves him from sin and death. He saves him from wrath and destruction. He saves him from hell and abandonment. He saves him from emptiness, guilt, shame, hopelessness, and more sin. When Christ saves sinners he breaks the chains. Christ’s salvation breaks cycles of sin, generations of bondage to the same patterns and sets in place a radical new way of living. Paul used this phrase that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and applied it to himself and then added the phrase, “*of whom I am the foremost.*” More on that in a minute.

C. **What we are saved to** (12,16)

We are saved to a life of service. (“Appointing me to his service” v.12) Serving others is not a job as much as it is a privilege. Serving others is a joy to be able to reflect Christ to others. We are saved from a life of hatred to a life of love. We are saved from a life of unbelief to a life of belief. We are saved from a life of thinking chiefly of ourselves to thinking chiefly of God and others. And we are saved from an eternity of utter darkness, lostness and fear, to eternal life (16). When you think of the phrase, “eternal life” what do you imagine? Whatever we imagine is too small. Eternal life is so much more than living long; it is living large. Think like this. God is eternal. From everlasting to everlasting, He is God. Man is not eternal. God is immortal and man is mortal. If man is going to be eternal and immortal, he has to get this from God. We are incapable of creating this. But, God gives us immortality through the gospel. God gives us eternal life through Christ. Since this life is from God, this eternal life is God giving himself to us. Eternal life is God bringing us into life with him. Eternal life is us enjoying life like God enjoys life. Therefore (and this is a big “therefore”), our life of service of others is a preview of the life that we will enjoy together in the relationship that God enjoys as God.

2. **We love to tell the story.** (12-14, 15-16)

A. **It is humbling.**

When Paul says “of whom I am the foremost” he is not being overly dramatic nor overly humble. Paul understands what he was. This is clear from how he describes himself. He also knows that he was not on a journey of trying to find God. He was on a mission that was motivated by his hatred of Christ. In the name of religion, he was executing people. In the name of religion, he was executing good people. He was committing horrendous crimes, and if God had not radically hijacked his life, he would have only continued down that road. God spared him by changing him. He was the worst sinner he had ever met. By God’s grace he now had the capacity to look at his own life and what he saw was tragic. There is no doubt in my mind that Paul met or knew of family members whose life he was responsible for ruining. I think that it is probably one of the contributing reasons why after his conversion, the church that he had attacked in Jerusalem did not want him around. The other disciples did not trust him. Can you blame them? They knew the families whose dads and husbands had been killed. They risked their lives in helping these people try to survive. They tried to explain to the kids how a good God would allow their dad to be killed. Surely Paul now knew the stories. He knew how those families that he destroyed had to beg to survive. He knew that some of them lost their homes and their jobs. When Paul would tell the story of his conversion, it was not full of drama and excitement. It was full of sorrow and grief.

When you study the life and ministry of Paul, you realize that toward the end of his ministry, he was on a mission to raise a considerable offering from the churches that he helped to start and strengthen, in order to help bring relief to the believers who were starving in Jerusalem due to the famine and persecution. He knows that this offering from the predominantly Gentile churches will go a long way to help build unity with the predominantly Jewish church. But, I have no doubt that Paul sees this as a way to be a channel of kindness to those that he had previously been an instrument of terror. Whenever Paul told his story, he was humbled. What about you? When was the last time you told someone how Christ saved you? And when you did, did it humble you? Were you amazed again at God’s grace? If you saw the depth of your sin and what you were saved from as clearly as God does, how would that affect how you think of and relate to others or even how you relate to God?

B. It is universal. (15)

Christ Jesus came into the world, to save sinners. Did you know that there are sinners all over the world? Everywhere you look, everywhere you go, you will find sinners. They are all over the place. Do you know what this means? It means that there are people all over the place that Christ came to rescue! It also means that you and I need to ask God to give us specific opportunities to share the gospel and open our eyes to those.

C. It is amazing. (16)

Christ saved the biggest enemy of the church and turned him into its greatest soldier. Let that truth melt into the pores of your soul. Christ did this in order to display his perfect patience. That is amazing patience. Christ is not indifferent to the suffering of his

children. Christ is grieved over his own being persecuted. His failure to intervene at times should not be interpreted as uncaring. There is something bigger that is going on. James he did not rescue from Herod's sword, but Peter he did. Did Jesus love Peter's wife more than James? No. Did it feel like it in the moment? Probably. Does it feel like it now? No! James' widow is no longer a widow. Her widow-ness was a means that Christ leveraged for a time to show his patience that brought more children to glory. And in glory, we will rejoice. In glory we will enjoy the living large, living long, living full, living sweet and living loud that will drown out all loss and all suffering from this present world. Christ's patience was put on display in the salvation of Paul so that you and the entire world would know that Jesus is a bigger savior than you are a sinner.

D. It is hopeful (16)

When you hear the stories about Jihadi John or other terrorists who delight in executing Christians it is natural to wonder why God permits people like that to live. I read the other day of a sniper who killed an ISIS soldier who was about to execute a prisoner of war. The temptation for many would be to cheer. If Paul were alive today, I think he would be sobered. That man was like him. God had every right to take him out, but didn't. Paul does not laugh about his past, it clearly grieves him. But he sees it for what it is. His conversion is an incredible demonstration of God's mercy and patience. God was so patient with Paul. And Paul's conversion should make this truth very clear. That if God can save Paul, and he did, God can save you. God did not save Paul reluctantly; he saved him enthusiastically. He saved him in order that God's patience might be put on display through him. In fact, God may have saved Paul in response to the prayers of the people whose family members were killed by him.

3. The gospel motivates our worship. (17)

Paul is overwhelmed at his conversion. All these years later, he is still amazed by God's grace. And this amazement is high-octane fuel for his worship engine. These verses put it all together don't they? Life + Doctrine = Worship! Life – Doctrine = Shallow Experiences. Doctrine – Life = Stale academia. But rich doctrinal truths understood and embraced in your life will overwhelm you with God's goodness.

Do you have a story of conversion? Have you ever trusted in Christ?

The church is a "used to be" club. What we used to be humbles us, but it is not what we are. Christ changes us, from the inside out. How do you view yourself? Whose voice do you listen to? What you used to be or what you are?

When was the last time you told your story?

Want to protect the church from false doctrine? Speak the gospel to one another.

Who is on your "will never change" list? He/she may be on Christ's hit list, and you may be the hit-man.