



TAMEONTA

Mercy for This Reason: The Foremost of Sinners and the Patience of Christ

By Mark Walker

"I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me, with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." (1 Timothy 1:12-17 ESV)



Original painting by P. Rodriguez, Arrowhead Correctional Center, Cañon City, CO

Paul wrote this first letter to his young apprentice Timothy from Macedonia. He had left Timothy behind in Ephesus to combat the influence of false teachers who had arisen in the church (1 Tim. 1:1-7). Biblical scholars have proposed a number of possibilities regarding the precise nature of this false teaching. For our purposes, it is enough to note that it involved, among other things, a misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of the law (1 Tim. 1:7). Paul used the false teachers' error as an opportunity to point out that, according to the gospel which God had entrusted to him, the true use of the law is not directed at righteous people, but at sinners (1 Tim. 1:8-11). The Apostle then pointed to his own experience as a prime example of the power of the gospel to generate, not "speculations" or "vain

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discussion" as the false teaching did (1 Tim. 1:4-6), but true transformation of even the worst sinner (Dennis 2326).

Paul began by thanking Jesus for giving him strength, judging him faithful, and appointing him to service (v. 12). Paul gave thanks because he recognized that this was not the treatment he deserved from Christ - in fact, it was the exact opposite. In himself, Paul was "a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent" (v. 13). As one who had slandered the name of Christ and persecuted His people, Paul deserved to have all his efforts destroyed and brought to nothing by the Lord's power; instead, Jesus strengthened him. All Paul's acts had been done in ignorance and unbelief (Gk. *apistia* - "faithlessness," v. 13), but Jesus judged him faithful. Paul was a vicious opponent of Christ and His church; Jesus turned him into a servant.



The Cell Church Founding Director
Mark Walker's DOC photo

Paul didn't earn Christ's favor through his own efforts at law-keeping or righteous behavior - quite the contrary (see Gal. 1:13, 14; Phil. 3:4-9). His gratitude arose from the recognition that he had not received his just due for his sin. Instead, he received the exact opposite of what he deserved: mercy, grace, faith, and love from the Lord in extraordinary abundance (vs. 13, 14; cf. Eph. 3:7, 8; 1 Cor. 15:9, 10). The fact that, in Christ, Paul received faith to replace his faithlessness, and love to replace his hatred, was visible evidence of the transformation that Jesus produced in him through the gospel (Kelly 53-54).

"It is not the righteous, not the law-abiding, not the deserving, but lost and unworthy sinners who are the objects of the saving work of Jesus."

"The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance" is a variation of a phrase used by Paul on other occasions in his pastoral epistles to call attention to something important he is about to say (v. 15; cf. 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Tit. 3:8; Dennis 2326; Kelly 54; Pratt 1953; Sproul 1752). Here, his important point is nothing less than a summary of the gospel itself: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (v. 15). It is not the righteous, not the law-abiding, not the deserving, but lost and unworthy sinners who are the objects of the saving work of Jesus. This was a great scandal during His earthly ministry. The religious and respectable Pharisees were offended that He consistently made friends with, and spent time among, sinners and social outcasts. The Lord Himself told them, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt. 9:9-13; cf. Luke 15; 19:1-10). Salvation offered freely to sinners is the very heart of the good news of Jesus Christ.

It is easy at this point to say, "Well, maybe Jesus came to save sinners, but that just means *normal* sinners - people who have told a few lies, used profanity, maybe stolen a thing or two, never gone

to church. It can't mean *me* - after all, I have done far too many horrible things. I'm hopeless." We might not put it quite that clearly, but many of us hold the same secret suspicion that we are beyond the reach of God's grace and mercy - that our sins are simply too black and too terrible. Paul, however, was not a "normal" sinner; rather, he said that he was the "foremost" sinner of all (v. 15). The word translated "foremost" may also be translated "chief" (NKJV) or "worst" (NIV); it suggests that Paul considered himself to be the most prominent sinner, sinful above and beyond all others. Nevertheless, in spite of his deeply sinful hatred of Jesus and persecution of the church - both to imprisonment and to death - Paul received mercy, grace, faith and love from the Lord.

Of course (we think), that was the *Apostle Paul*, right? Sure, God showed *him* mercy - after all, he was special. Paul was going to spread the gospel all over the known world, plant churches, and write the majority of the New Testament. Clearly he was a special case; I cannot expect God to treat me the same way. I am no one special, and my sins are too great. The problem with that sort of thinking is that it does not square with Paul's explanation in this passage. Just as the main reason God showed Paul mercy was not acts of righteousness Paul had done in the past, so also it was not primarily because of what Paul would do in the future. Certainly Paul recognized that he was saved, in part, to do the good work which God had prepared in advance for him to do (see, e.g., Eph. 2:10; 3:8-13). But that was not God's sole reason for granting grace to Paul, the foremost of sinners. When it came time to explain to Timothy why God had shown him mercy, Paul said: "I received mercy *for this reason*, that in me, as *the foremost*, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life" (v. 16, emphasis added). "It is precisely here, in the fact that he is the first and foremost of sinners, that Paul discerns the reason for God's gracious dealing with him" (Kelly 55).

How extraordinary! God chose to show mercy to Paul, not because of righteous works he either had done or would do, but because Paul, as such a great and notorious sinner, would be a perfect example for others. It was God's intention that Paul should serve as a pattern, or prototype, of the way Christ saves the absolute worst of sinners. Ultimately the mercy shown to Paul was meant to tell us something about Jesus, not Paul. By saving Paul, the chief sinner, it was Christ's design to "*display*" (that is, to demonstrate or draw attention to in order to make known) "his perfect patience" (v. 16). The word translated "patience" suggests forbearance, endurance, and the ability to bear up under provocation. Jesus wanted to show His character - that He is well able to endure the insults, offenses, and provocations of the worst sins in order to show mercy, grace, and love to the sinner (Kelly 55). What better way to demonstrate this sort of patience than to grant mercy to the chief of sinners? "Paul's self-confessed pre-Christian history...made him, ironically, the perfect illustration of the effectiveness of the gospel, the boundless grace of God and the inexhaustible patience of Christ" (Towner 55).

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Mark celebrating God's mercy and grace with his family upon his graduation from Moody Bible Institute

Moreover, the Lord did not want to display this sort of patience only to a few, but to *everyone* who would believe in Him (v.16). Christ's patience is perfect because it is not based on the character of those who receive it, but on His own character. The pattern of Paul was given for all of us. I see myself just as Paul saw himself - the foremost of sinners. Because I am the same sort of sinner, I can look to the example of Paul and be confident that Christ is also long-suffering toward me, and is able and willing to grant me the same grace and mercy if I will trust in Him for forgiveness and deliverance. "Paul's life, as the worst of sinners, was like a dark backdrop against which the beauty of God's grace only showed more brilliantly. That extreme contrast, Paul says, served as an example for others who might believe. People could look at Paul's life and see his great sin and see God's great grace and be encouraged to believe that God really can and does forgive sin, even great sin" (Lindsay). Many of you reading this probably feel the same way I do - that when it comes to sin you are the worst of the worst. If so, the grace and mercy that Christ showed to Paul should be a great encouragement for you! If Jesus is patient enough to endure and forgive the provocation of Paul's sin, He will surely do the same for you if you will trust Him.

But the news is even better than that, because the example of Paul shows us something else. Remember that the Lord not only saved Paul, not only forgave him, but transformed him into a faithful servant, putting him into the ministry (v. 12). And what a great service was accomplished through Paul!

After Paul was saved, he became a foremost saint. The Lord did not allot him a second-class place in the Church. He had been the leading sinner, but his Lord did not therefore say, 'I save you, but I shall always remember your wickedness to your disadvantage.' Not so! He counted him faithful, putting him into the ministry and into the Apostleship, so that he was not a whit behind the very chief of the Apostles! Brother, there is no reason why, if you have gone very far in sin, you should not go equally far in usefulness! On the contrary, there is a reason why you *should* do so, for it is a rule of Grace that to whom much is forgiven, the same loves much - and much love leads to much service (Spurgeon, emphasis added).

If God used such abundantly overflowing grace to Paul, the foremost of sinners, as a pattern to display and exalt the patience of Christ Jesus, why can He not do the same with current and former prisoners like you and me? Why can't we, once great and notorious sinners, also serve as

testimonies of Christ's long-suffering to those around us because of the love and grace He has shown us? Let us ask God to make us - not only as forgiven sinners, but also (by His grace) as faithful servants and ministers of the gospel - a shining example and encouragement to many who might otherwise fear themselves to be beyond His mercy. Against the background of our past sinfulness the patience of Christ will be radiant, His love and grace magnified, the surpassing value of His death glorified - and desperate people will look at us and say, "If there is such grace for *them* in Jesus, surely there is grace for me!" May the Lord use His mercy in our lives to inspire many to exclaim, with us and with Paul, "To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (v. 17)!

"Why can't we, once great and notorious sinners, also serve as testimonies of Christ's long-suffering to those around us because of the love and grace He has shown us?"

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God's Good Plan

By Q. Valdois

"And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy— wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect." (Hebrews 11:32-40 ESV)

What's going on with your life right now? Are things really great, with everything going better than you could imagine? Maybe each day lately seems just like the one before; nothing seems overly good or bad, your life is just calm and smooth. Perhaps, though, your life isn't going great. Things

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don't seem calm and smooth - in fact, everything is difficult and your days are full of suffering.

If you are anything like me, you can easily be fooled into judging God's goodness by your own life's circumstances. When our circumstances are bad, it's so easy to think that either God's good plan got messed up somehow, or that Satan sort of "over-powered" God and came out the winner this time (as if Satan could, in any way, conquer the God who created him). Our minds try to find meaning in our pain, and our fallen hearts have a difficult time trusting God and His good plan.

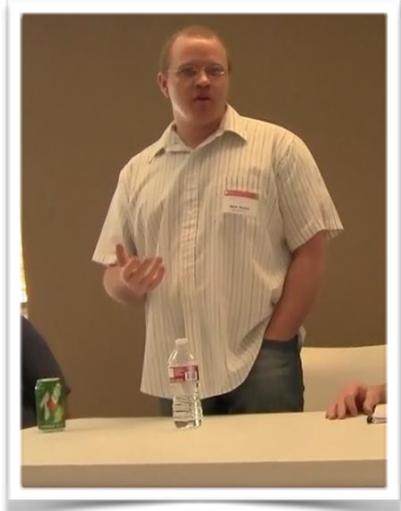
I really appreciate Hebrews 11:32-40. After giving us a stellar list of saints that had faith in the promises of God, the writer ends with a list of believers who experienced amazing things in their lives. He also includes believers who experienced incredibly difficult lives. Some of the hardships these fellow believers faced are things we can relate to, and others are too horrible to think about.

I'm sure the faithful who saw the dead raised or stopped the mouths of lions felt great about God's good plan! On the other hand, those who were sawn in two may have had a harder time seeing the good. Verses 39 & 40 show us God's good plan because, even though none of these believers saw the fulfillment of the promise they had put their faith in, they were recipients of Christ's great work - just like we are. God's good plan is awesome!

As you live your daily life, know that whatever your circumstances are, you are right in the middle of God's good plan. His plan is always, *always* good. We can trust Him, even though we may not understand and may be suffering. Remember Paul's encouragement in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18: *"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."* Trust in God's good plan!

Ministry Updates

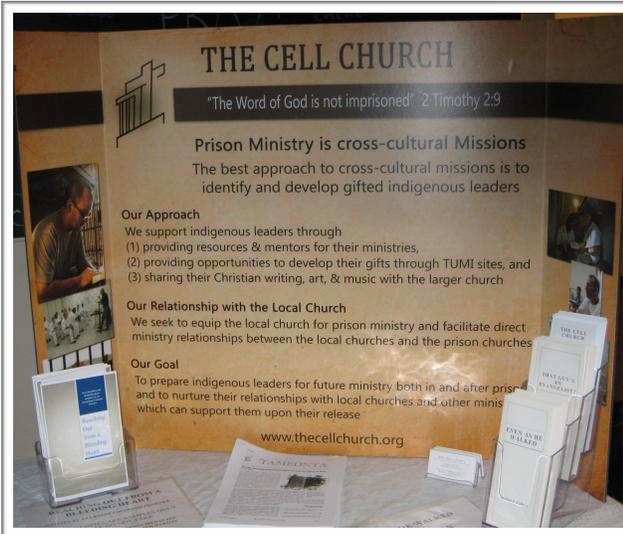
- The Cell Church is blessed to be corresponding with gifted Christian leaders in ten prisons in Colorado and Arizona. We are excited to see how the Lord will work through all your ministries, and we are prayerfully seeking ways to equip and support you as you faithfully serve Him in the labors to which He has called you.
- In May we attended the first re-entry ministry conference for Prison Fellowship in Colorado. The Cell Church set up a table



Mark sharing his re-entry experience with Prison Fellowship volunteers as part of the Returning Citizens Panel

display where we were able to share the vision for our ministry and distribute some of our publications. Mark attended some very helpful sessions, and shared his story while encouraging volunteers as part of the Returning Citizens Panel. It was also an opportunity for The Cell Church to connect with several great re-entry ministries in Colorado.

- We are praying for patience as we work our way slowly through the application process in order



The Cell Church table display at the Prison Fellowship re-entry conference

to become an approved TUMI Satellite, and as we continue trying to establish our mentoring program. The Lord has been faithful, and we wait on His perfect timing. We had the honor of attending the graduation ceremony for a TUMI site in Colorado Springs in June, and it was humbling and inspiring to be able to meet with and pray for such a committed group of graduates!

- Several brothers have recently sent some beautiful artwork to The Cell Church. We are excited to be able to begin sharing this Christ-exalting art with the churches, both in and outside prison, through our website and various other forms of publication.

- God has given us a new partnership with a prayer group at Arrowhead Correctional Center! These men have agreed to lift up prayer requests from the other prison churches and our ministry. Anyone who would like to request

prayer may send requests to The Cell Church, and we will not only pray ourselves but will also forward them (with your first name and facility) to the Arrowhead prayer group.

- The Lord has opened the door for The Cell Church to potentially be involved in planting a transitional church, in partnership with a DOC-approved re-entry volunteer, to provide a temporary church home for those being released from prison. This is an unexpected opportunity. Please pray that the Lord would give us wisdom and courage to discern and follow His leading.

Letters from the Church

"Thank you so much for your awesome support. I believe there may be nothing quite as healing and restoring as becoming a useful vessel for our Lord, Jesus Christ. As you may know by experience this is no easy task here. Yet when we live for Him, in Him, through Him and with Him, then we know He uses all things to train and raise up His children and though we face difficult times they are followed by great rewards."

- Craig, Arrowhead Correctional Center, Cañon City, CO

"The testimony [of Daniel Scott Dias] was and is very powerful. I was moved to tears. To see men who have lived that life of death be saved, delivered and transformed is truly a miracle. It is awesome! I totally relate and know and praise God for all He has done and continues to do in such lives. Sterling is on fire! Thank you for sharing that powerful testimony."

- Phillip, Arrowhead Correctional Center, Cañon City, CO