

1 Timothy 1:12-20
1 Kings 21
Psalm 10

“The Foremost”

(July 24, 2011)

There is no one as bad as Ahab.

If the story in 1 Kings 21 does not convince you of that,
then the parenthetical comment in verses 25-26 should!
The author of Kings adds very few “explanatory” comments,
but he adds one here to explain that Ahab’s repentance
should not be viewed as genuine!

And yet, because Ahab humbled himself –
because Ahab feigned repentance –
God had “temporary” mercy on him.

What should you learn from this?

If God has “temporary” mercy on those who feign repentance,
how much more will he show full mercy on those who sincerely turn to him in faith!

In response to 1 Kings 21, we are singing the first half of Psalm 10.

The first half of Psalm 10 describes someone very much like Ahab,
and asks *why?*

Why, O LORD, do you stand far away?

Why do you allow the Ahab’s of the world to destroy the Naboth’s?

Sing Psalm 10:1-11

Read 1 Timothy 1

At the end of 1 Timothy 1, Paul speaks of how he himself had once been a blasphemer –
and then speaks of Hymenaeus and Alexander, who are current blasphemers.
And he speaks of handing them over to Satan to teach them not to blaspheme.

The second half of Psalm 10 would be a fitting psalm to sing on such an occasion.

Sing Psalm 10:12-18

At the heart of 1 Timothy we find the reason for Paul’s letter:

“I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay,
you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God,
which is the church of the living God,
a pillar and buttress of the truth.” (3:14-15)

How should we live in the church?

What does it mean to be part of the household of God?

Today we are looking at Paul’s example which sets the tone for his charge to Timothy.

Chapters 1 and 6 form something of a framework around Paul's first letter to Timothy.
The word "entrust" in 1:18 and 6:20 forms an inclusio around the whole epistle,
as Paul exhorts Timothy to remain faithful to the apostolic teaching.
Indeed, chapters 1 and 6 have very similar content,
as Paul warns against false teachers,
and urges Timothy to hold fast to "the deposit entrusted to you."

But even within chapter 1, the word "charge" is used in verses 3 and 18 to bracket the chapter,
as Paul's exhorts Timothy to *deal* with false teachers.
Paul opens his letter in verse 3 by reminding Timothy to "charge" (or command)
certain persons not to teach any different doctrine.
Then at the end of chapter 1 (verse 18) Paul says that he is giving Timothy
"this charge" (or command) in accordance with the prophecies
previously made about him.

I should mention here an important feature of the Pastoral Epistles.
Paul uses the language of "faith" more in 1 Timothy than anywhere else:
he uses the verb, *pisteuo* (to believe), 3 times;
the noun, *pistis* (faith/belief), 19 times;
and the adjective, *pistos* (faithful), 11 times.

That is 33 times in 113 verses – once every 3 ½ verses
(compared with once every 7 verses in Romans – 62 times in 433 verses;
once every 5 ½ verses in Galatians – 27 times in 149 verses;
Also, in 2 Timothy, it is once every 7 verses – 12 in 83 verses,
and in Titus, it is once every 4 verses – 11 in 46 verses)

But while Paul uses the language of faith more often here than anywhere else,
he is often using it somewhat differently than in Galatians and Romans.

In Galatians and Romans, the emphasis is on believing in Jesus –
trusting in him for salvation.
Here in the Pastoral Epistles, the emphasis is on *being faithful* to the gospel.
Here in the Pastorals Paul will speak more of "the faith"
that Timothy is to "guard" and "hand down."

The reason for the difference is clear:
in the letters to Galatia and Rome, the problem is that people are following the law –
rather than believing in Jesus.
And so the solution is to call them to believe in Jesus!

In the letters to Timothy and Titus, the problem is false teachers,
who are teaching heterodoxy (different doctrine – v3).
And so the solution is to urge Timothy to remain true to "the faith."

So depending on the problem, Paul will either speak of faith as “*faith in Jesus*” or as “*the faith* that was once delivered to all the saints.”

In the modern world we have tended to pit these against each other.

Some people so emphasize “faith” as relationship (as “trust in Jesus”) that they reject the idea of “the faith” as doctrine.

Others get so wrapped up in the intellectual system of doctrine that they have little personal “trust in Jesus.”

We all have these tendencies.

Some of you tend one way – and some the other.

It’s why we need each other to remember that *both* are important.

If you try to have “faith in Jesus” without the “the faith once delivered to all the saints” you will wind up with heterodoxy (different doctrine).

If you try to have “the faith once delivered to all the saints” without “faith in Jesus” you will have a sterile rationalism.

Head and heart – piety and intellect – should never be pulled apart.

Practical studies should be infused with sound doctrine.

Doctrinal studies should be characterized by robust piety.

The reason why we guard the deposit of apostolic teaching that was given to us is precisely because it is *that teaching* that promotes true faith and piety.

As we finish chapter 1 today,

we will see how Paul himself blends together these two senses of “faith.”

1. Paul’s Example (v12-17)

a. From “Blasphemer” to “Faithful” (v12-14)

In verse 11 you have the verb “pisteuo” (to believe) used in the sense of “entrusted” – “in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.”

Paul has been “entrusted” with the gospel as a message that is to be handed down to others.

In verse 12, the word “faithful” is used:

¹²I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service,

Now this may seem odd that Paul would say “Christ...judged me faithful, appointing me to his service”

especially if you think of Paul’s “call” on the Damascus road as Paul’s appointment.

But this is an example of Paul's eschatological thinking:

Christ considered Paul faithful – not because Paul had previously been faithful –
but because Christ would strengthen Paul to become what he previously was not!
(The word translated “judged” is actually the word translated “reckoned” or “considered”
four times in Philippians 2-3.
Paul is “considered” faithful in spite of his prior record.)

And Paul admits this:

¹³*though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.*

I was a blasphemer – I spoke wicked things against God and his people.
I was a persecutor – I pursued the church and sought to destroy God's people.
I was an insolent opponent – ubristes – (it is where we get the word “hubris”)
but it is more than just “pride.”
It is regularly used of violent and slanderous people
(e.g., in Proverbs, where it is often used of the violent proud
who divide the spoil of their plunderings – think “Ahab”!)
Paul is saying that he was one of those “violent proud” who plundered the poor.

But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,

Paul is not using ignorance as an excuse.
After all, he knew exactly what Jesus had said and done.
He understood Christian doctrine quite well!
So how can he say that he “acted ignorantly”?

Because he acted in unbelief!
He *thought* that he was serving God,
when in fact he was blaspheming God!

So what if Paul had *known* that Jesus *was* who he claimed to be?
Then he would have been a high-handed blasphemer.

What is the difference?

Just look at the end of the passage – where blasphemy comes up again –
as Hymenaeus and Alexander are handed over to Satan
so that they will learn not to blaspheme.

But for Paul:

¹⁴*and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*

Here, Paul brings in the Romans/Galatians aspect of faith.

Here – where he is talking about the beginning of the life of faith,
he speaks of “the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”

The beginning of the life of faith does not start with a system of doctrine.
It begins with a person – Christ Jesus.

You may be a blasphemer.

You may have said all sorts of wicked things against God and his church.

You may be a persecutor – an insolent opponent.

You may have done all sorts of awful things to Christians.

But so long as you are separated from the grace of God in Jesus Christ,
you are acting ignorantly in unbelief.

It’s not a matter of whether you know Christian doctrine.

It’s a matter of whether you know Jesus Christ!

Those who are still under a misapprehension of who Jesus is
are acting ignorantly in unbelief.

They are still blasphemers, persecutors, and insolent opponents!
But there is hope for them!

Why?

Well, that is what Paul explains in verses 15-16:

b. From “Foremost” in Sin to “Foremost” in Mercy (v15-16)

¹⁵*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance,*

Throughout the pastoral epistles, Paul uses this opening to highlight key points.

And he uses the adjective “pistos” here –

the saying is faithful – it is something you should believe –

and worthy of full acceptance –

you should take this to heart:

that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,

George Knight points out that this usage of “world” (kosmos) is unique to John.

Usually when Paul speaks of the “kosmos” he is speaking of how God created the world,

or how sin entered the “kosmos” and brought all under judgment,

so that the “kosmos” is hostile to God.

Here, however, Paul seems to use the word “kosmos” in the Johannine sense

as the sphere of human existence which is not only fallen into sin,

but is also now the place where redemption takes place.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,
It is not the healthy who need a physician – but the sick.
It is not the righteous who need salvation – but sinners!

And if you think you are righteous – read Romans 3!

Or – just keep reading 1 Timothy 1:

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

You've probably heard references to Paul as the "chief of sinners."
That language makes it sound like Paul is claiming to be the "worst" of sinners.
But that is not what "chief" means.
The ESV translates it "foremost,"
which is a good middle ground in the range of the meaning of the Greek, "protos"
(usually translated "first" or "chief").

Whether you say, chief or foremost or first,
the point here is that Paul is claiming to be something of a prototype –
the first of many.

It is not especially a matter of how "bad" a sinner he was
(although "blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent" is certainly bad;
slaughtering Christians is truly blasphemous!),
but Paul's language also calls our attention to how "first" he was.

Because according to the Law, Saul of Tarsus was "blameless."
In Philippians 3:5-6, Paul points out that he was
"circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel,
of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews;
as to the law, a Pharisee;
as to zeal, a persecutor of the church;
as to righteousness under the law, blameless."

I want you to keep these two aspects of Paul's identity together:
"as to righteousness under the law, blameless"
"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."

Think about that!

You can be *blameless* as to the righteousness under the law –
you can be the most upstanding, law-abiding person in the church –
and yet be a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent opponent of Christ!

And no, I'm not talking about someone else – I'm talking about *you*.

Notice how Paul uses the present tense to describe his status as the “foremost sinner.”
I am the foremost of sinners (protos eimi ego).

While Paul’s fundamental identity has become “holy in Christ” –
he does not shy away from acknowledging that “I am” the foremost of sinners.
This is why, week by week,
we identify ourselves as “sinners” in the prayer of confession.

But his identification of himself as a sinner
immediately moves him to an emphasis on Christ’s mercy:

¹⁶*But [Paul says] 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.*

Here we see what Paul is doing with this “foremost” language.
Paul is the foremost sinner –
he is also the foremost in receiving mercy.

Or, to translate it slightly differently,
Paul is the prototypical sinner, and the prototypical saint.

Paul received mercy so that in him, as the foremost,
Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience
as an example to *you* who believe in him for eternal life.

Paul is the prototype of saved sinners.
The Twelve were all faithful Jews who were called from faith to faith.
The Twelve had never been ignorant unbelievers
(a little dense – sure! But unbelievers? No!)

But Paul was an ignorant unbeliever when he was called –
and so Paul became the “foremost” – an example for *you*.

And because of this Paul breaks into praise and thanks to God for his great mercy and patience:

2. Doxology (v17)

¹⁷*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.
Amen.*

King of Ages – in every age, he is God
Immortal – God does not die
Invisible – God cannot be seen
The Only God – rooted in the Shema “the LORD our God, the LORD is one”

There is only one God.

The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God –
but there is only one God!

That is why we baptize “in the *name* [singular]
of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

And when Paul thinks about what this one God has done in Christ Jesus,
he cannot help but break forth into praise and thanks!

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

When you think about what God has done in Jesus Christ –

how he has shown mercy *to you* –

do you break forth in song?

do you launch into doxologies – proclaiming the glory
of him who loved us and gave himself for us?

I fear that we are too preoccupied with our own glory and honor.

We are so busy “making something” of ourselves,

that we do not take the time to give honor and glory to God!

If you have been delivered from sin and death,

if you have been saved from eternal misery and despair,

then you should respond with giving honor and glory to him who saved you!

3. Timothy’s Charge (v18-20)

a. Wage the Good Warfare (v18-19a)

¹⁸*This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, ¹⁹ holding faith and a good conscience.*

We saw earlier that verses 3 and 18 book-end the chapter.

But now we can see that Paul’s charge to Timothy
is rooted in verse 17.

The call to “wage the good warfare” is rooted in the doxology of verse 17.

Indeed, *everything* in the Christian life is rooted in verse 17!

I think I need to remind you of something.

It has been a few months since I said it last!

You are not the center of the universe.

Jesus is.

He is God.

You are not.

Timothy is to wage the good warfare because the immortal, invisible God
has shown such patience and mercy in the Messiah, Jesus.

And so Paul entrusts this charge to Timothy in accordance with “the prophecies.”

What does Paul mean by these “prophecies”?

We tend to think that prophecy means “predictions about what Timothy would do.”
But prophecy is a much broader concept.

We don’t know what the prophecies were –
but we *do* know what the prophecies were *for*!

“that *by them* you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience.”

And in 4:14, Paul will exhort Timothy,
“Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy
when the council of elders laid their hands on you.”

So please do not think of this as some special revelation that was uniquely given for Timothy!
The prophecies about Timothy were not some oracle about marvelous future events.
Rather, they were about his equipping as a minister of the gospel to preach Christ.

This sort of prophecy happens frequently at Presbyterian ordination services!
If we believe that in a minister’s ordination he becomes a “gift” of Christ to the church,
then his ordination is itself a part of Christ’s prophetic ministry.
When the presbytery (the council of elders) lays their hands on a man,
they set him apart to share in Christ’s prophetic ministry.

And there are times in that context when presbyters make “forward-looking” statements!
Not only in the imperative: this is what you should do.
But in the indicative: this is what will happen to you!

You will be tested.
You will be tried.
Indeed, ordination is martyrdom!

But, by the grace of God,
you will persevere,
you will endure –
and in the end you will pass through suffering and death
and obtain the outcome of your faith in the resurrection of the dead.

This is what it means for Timothy to wage the good warfare,
“holding faith and a good conscience.”

Remember verse 5 from last week?

“The aim of our charge” – the goal or purpose of Paul’s ministry –
“is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”
Paul’s whole ministry is oriented toward a faith that works by love (Galatians) –
the obedience of faith (Romans) –
“a love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”

b. The Shipwreck of Faith: Blasphemy (v19b-20)

By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith,²⁰ among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

But if you reject faith and a good conscience,
then you will make a shipwreck of your faith.

Paul says that Hymenaeus and Alexander have been handed over to Satan,
so that they may be taught not to blaspheme –
precisely the same word that Paul used to describe his own pre-Christian self.

What makes Hymenaeus and Alexander’s shipwreck so awful
is that they have reverted precisely to the point where Paul was
before God had mercy on him;
and *unlike Paul*,
they already believe that Jesus is the Christ.

They are not acting ignorantly in unbelief –
they are acting high-handedly in rebellion against the truth.

Therefore, Paul hands them over to Satan so “that they may learn not to blaspheme.”

What does it mean to “hand someone over to Satan”?

It means to put them out of the church.
The church is the kingdom of Christ.
The world is the domain of the devil.
If you are put out of the kingdom of Christ,
then you are in the realm of Satan.

In baptism you are brought out of the realm of Satan and into the kingdom of Christ.

Baptism is a passing from darkness to light – from death to life.

Paul says in Romans 6 –

“all of us who were baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into his death”
and in Galatians 3

“as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”

Baptism is our entrance into the household of Christ.

“And if you are Christ’s then you are Abraham’s offspring,
heirs according to promise.” (Gal 3:29)

That's what baptism *is* – and that's what baptism *does*.
But some who are baptized don't get it.
Yes, as we'll see in Titus 3, baptism is “the washing of regeneration” –
but objective meaning and work of the sacrament
only becomes ours *by faith*.

Hymenaeus and Alexander had been baptized,
but at least by the time when Paul wrote to Timothy,
they had not evidenced “faith and a good conscience.”
Indeed, they were blasphemers!
We don't know the details of their blasphemy,
but an example of such blasphemy is given in Acts 8,
where Simon Magus is “handed over to Satan” for his blasphemy.

This is a good reminder to you who are baptized to “improve” your baptism
by trusting God's promises and remembering his faithfulness,
by giving glory and honor to him!

You might wonder – if faith is required in order to receive the benefits of baptism,
then why do we baptize infants?

Let me just say that it is not a question of “infant baptism” vs. “believers baptism,”
because everyone agrees that we should baptize *adult converts* upon profession of faith.
And *every instance* of baptism in the New Testament has to do with *converts* –
people who have just professed faith in Christ.

So what are you supposed to do with the children of converts?
Baptists would say, “wait until they grow up and convert!”
But the NT never says that.
There is nothing in the NT that indicates that the children of believers
are to be considered as “little heathens”
who need to be converted.
Rather, the NT views them as “holy” (1 Cor 7)
and addresses them as part of the church (Eph 6/Col 3).

And that is why I call the children – just like the adults –
to repent and believe the gospel!
If you do not repent of your sin and believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ,
then no amount of water can save you!

Therefore, let us pray God that **Ian and Evangeline** would receive a true and living faith and
that the outward baptism be, through the work of the Holy Spirit, inwardly accomplished with
the cleansing water of grace.