

“Immortal, Invisible, the Only God,” 1 Timothy 1:12-20 (Fourth Sunday After Pentecost, June 17, 2018)

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, ¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

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. 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.

PRAY

If you asked your average believer in the world today, “What is important to you about your Christian faith?” I’m sure that pretty high up on their list of important things are the powerful experiences they have as Christians – emotional experiences, spiritual experiences, aesthetic experiences.

I know that many Pentecostal Christians and those who are involved in the charismatic movement have told me that the raw emotional power of the worship services is vital to their faith – the excitement they experience with the music, the feeling that comes with speaking in tongues or in a private prayer language, brings them closer to God.

I’ve heard many Roman Catholic Christians and not a few Anglican or Episcopalian Christians tell me that the liturgy of their worship and the beauty of their churches and worship spaces mean the world to them. They help them to experience the power and majesty of God.

I’ve never had anyone say anything like that about our worship space, either here or at the Oxford Middle School. This worship space looks, from the outside, like it should house a Mexican restaurant. The middle school worship space looks, well, like a middle school, and middle schools are not exactly known for evoking awe and wonder in someone’s soul.

And you might expect me – the kind of pastor who writes out his sermons word for word, who is pretty conservative in his theology and his lifestyle, the kind of guy wears a sportscoat every Sunday when he preaches and would, if he could get away with it, wear a black ministerial robe – you might expect me to say that only immature, theologically suspect Christians have or want powerful, religious experiences. That you can’t trust Christians like that.

But if you think that you would be wrong. Christians should often have powerful religious experiences. It's biblical to have experiences like that. The apostle Paul, the man who wrote 1 Timothy and indeed half the New Testament, had them all the time.

1 Timothy 1:17: "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." What's that? That's spontaneous, doxological praise to God. It's not like Paul said, "You know, I'm sixteen verses into 1 Timothy so I better write something about how God is due all honor and praise." No – Paul experienced something wonderful about God and then wrote that verse, which in turn is so beautiful that a hymn sung by millions of Christians over the years ("Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise") was inspired by that verse.

Paul actually does this all the time in his writings – he gets so moved that he can't help himself – he just interjects praise to God. Romans 11:33-36: "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴ For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? ³⁵ Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."

Again, Ephesians 3:20-21: "²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

It's not just that I think it's ok for you to have powerful experiences as a Christian. I'm telling you that you *should have them*. These experiences should be a regular part of your Christian walk.

Now, you can make an idol out of powerful experiences. That's what pastors like me worry about and what concerns us about so much religious experience out there. Many who claim to be Christians want these experiences so badly that they don't care about how the Bible is handled or the doctrine that's taught in their churches and they don't care about truth – just give me that experience. They're not worried about their lives being changed by Christianity so that they love and serve others the way Jesus did – just give me that experience and my life can remain a sewer.

So, how can we have these experiences like Paul had and, if we're honest, we want to have, without going off the rails? Let's look at today's text of nine verses and find out. We'll see that if you want to have the experiences Paul had first, you must know what you are. Second, you must see what Jesus has done. Two points, and then at the end I'll give some application.

First, you must know what you are. What did Paul think he was? In 1 Corinthians 15:9 Paul called himself "the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle." This was not an isolated statement. In Ephesians 3:8 Paul called himself "the least among all the Christians."

But he tops it all off with this statement in 1 Timothy 1:15. "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." 1 Timothy 1:15. The King James Bible has Paul saying that Jesus saves sinners "of whom I am chief." I am the chief sinner, Paul says. I am the worst sinner in the world.

Many people today, probably most in our society, look at that verse and say that is an unhealthy way to look at yourself. They psychoanalyze Paul and say, “Paul has all the symptoms of a classic manic depressive. He’s up, then he’s down, and he’s too morbid.”

They say that because in our society the greatest sin, perhaps one of the only remaining sins, is to be hard on yourself and to say things like “I am a sinner.” Our culture tells us that every single person on the planet is a ray of brilliant and unique sunshine, a bundle of wonderful creativity, that needs to be let loose on the world. Everyone is special, talented, and everyone gets a trophy for participating. The last thing we should do is have negative feelings about ourselves.

There are thousands of examples of this kind of thinking, but one of the most popular ones from a few years ago (and one that parents could not get out of their heads) was from the movie *Frozen*, when Elsa sang “Let It Go.” And what did she sing? She sang, “It’s funny how some distance makes everything seem small / and the fears that once controlled me can’t get to me at all / It’s time to see what I can do / to test the limits and break through / no right, no wrong, no rules for me / I’m free / Let it go, let it go.” Sorry if I triggered any moms and dads in the audience with those lyrics.

That’s our actual national anthem. “It’s time to see what I can do – no right, no wrong, no rules.” We keep telling ourselves that, it keeps getting blasted to us through the media – through movies, television, music, advertising – *but that doesn’t make it true*. Friends, we can say, “I’m free, I’m free” all we want – but how often do you continue to do the same thing over and over again, the same destructive, counter-productive things you no longer want to do? How often do you continue to say the things you no longer want to say? How often do the words come out of your mouth and you think, “Why did I say that ... again?”

We are not free. What Paul writes in Romans 7:15 rings far more true to me than anything our culture tells us about how free and special we are. Paul writes, “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” I honestly don’t see how anyone could make it to high school, let alone adulthood, and you not say, “Yep, that’s me. I feel controlled a lot more like than I feel free.”

But I can imagine someone saying, “Yes, but J.D. – Paul doesn’t just say he’s a sinner or controlled by his sin. Paul says he’s the chief sinner, he’s the worst sinner. That’s got to be exaggeration. Sure, Paul says in verse 13 that he was ‘a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.’ He was a bad guy, but the chief sinner? Come on – that’s too much. No one should think that about themselves.”

I’m here to tell you, “Yes, you should! You should think you are the chief sinner.” It’s not morbid and it’s not exaggeration. When Paul says, “I am the chief sinner,” it does not mean he had a printout of the interior life of every person who ever lived; he had all their thoughts and actions and motivations on paper, and he could compare them with his and he could see that he was the literally worst person who ever lived.

Rather, it meant this for Paul: his sins were more grievous to him, more shameful to him, more disgusting to him, than anyone else's. In calling himself the chief sinner, Paul is basically saying, "Look – I know other people are messed up. I know everyone is a sinner. I'm the apostle Paul – of course I know that. And I know that in principle some folks out there have done worse things than me. But I am so aware of my flaws, mistakes, and the evil that is in me that I can't sit here and dwell on *your* sins. My sins are too big and shameful to me for that."

Does that describe you? It should. In Matthew 7:3-5 Jesus very famously talks about this principle. He says, "3 Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

Your sins, even if objectively they're smaller than someone else's sins, ought to look bigger to you than the sins of everyone else in the world. Why? *Because their your sins. They're in your life. They're messing you up.* And it's in that sense, Paul says, he is the chief sinner. And it's in that sense you should think you are the chief sinner. That's who you are!

What if the technology existed where I could press a button on the podium and all of the sudden all the thoughts you've had just in the month of June started scrolling on the wall? All the good thoughts and all the selfish thoughts, lustful thoughts, jealous thoughts, angry thoughts? Would anyone want me to do that to them? I wouldn't want my thoughts listed up here. I don't think I could bear that.

Say I pressed the button and Jim Davis' thoughts flashed up here – I mean, he's out of town today and he's moving to Orlando anyway. But if that happened and if the log in your eye is so much bigger than the speck in your brother's, you wouldn't sit there and say, "Oh, I can't believe what Jim thought!" You'd think, "That's nothing, *nothing* compared to my thoughts. Look at all the good thoughts he had. I'm not sure I have that many kind thoughts, and anyway I'm just not interested in judging him on any bad thoughts he's had because I'm so aware of mine."

It's not morbid to know you are the chief sinner. It's necessary if you're really going to love and have compassion for the people around you and refuse to judge and condemn them.

Now, *how does knowing that you are the chief sinner lead to a powerful, Christian experience?*

Second, because when you see you are the chief sinner it makes what Jesus did all the sweeter. And what did Jesus do? Let's read 1 Timothy 1:13b-16 very slowly and carefully point out what Jesus did.

"But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord **overflowed** for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." 1 Timothy 1:13b-14. The Greek word translated as "overflowed" is "huper-pleonadzo," which means literally "super-abounding" or "super-flowing." What did Jesus do? His grace to me was like the Mississippi River in flood pouring down on me and carrying me along in a torrent of faith and love.

“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.” 1 Timothy 1:15. What did Jesus do? He saved me by dying on the cross for my sins in my place and turning away the wrath of God I deserve so that now all I get from the Father in heaven is love.

My favorite, though, might be verse 16: “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.” 1 Timothy 1:16. The Greek word translated as “perfect patience” is “macrothumia,” which means in this context “the long-temper, the long-passion, of Jesus Christ.”

You’ve heard the phrase “short fuse.” As in, “That man has a short fuse – he can’t control his temper.” Jesus Christ has the longest fuse you can imagine. No matter how often we sin, no matter how angry we get, how many mistakes we make, Jesus never blows up on us.

Since I’m preaching on the chief of sinners, I can’t just joke about someone else’s sins. I have to talk about my own. I have a wonderful wife who loves me, but occasionally she does something that irritates or annoys me. That doesn’t make her a bad person, that just makes her a human being. I would get annoyed by Jesus. I know I would.

When I get annoyed, you know what I start to think? I think, “I can’t be nice to her now or say kind things to her because then she won’t change. She won’t know how bad she’s been and she’ll get away with it. She’ll think it’s ok.” It’s like I think I’m the Holy Spirit and I have to show her, because I can’t wait on him to do it – he’ll probably take years and I can be a jerk now and get a response.

But Paul tells us that the God of the universe loved me and displayed perfect patience with me. He is not short-fused, he is long-fused. And if you really believe that you are the chief sinner, the news that Jesus is long-fused with you will melt your heart and give you patience and kindness toward all those around you.

In other words, friends, do you want to have a Christian experience? Focus on your failings far more than anyone else’s and see how Jesus’ grace abounds to you, how his faith and love overflow to you, how he saved you from your sins, and how he is perfectly patient with you. You do that and you’ll have a powerful Christian experience that won’t lead you off into heresy, an experience you won’t turn into idolatry, and an experience that won’t countenance any immorality in your life. You’ll have the kind of pure, powerful religious experiences that Paul had all over the New Testament. You’ll say, “To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Before I move on, I know some of you grew up in an environment where you were made to feel and maybe you were flat out told that you were worthless. Maybe you struggle with severe depression or some other psychological affliction. You don’t just think you’re the chief sinner; you feel absolutely worthless. But you’re not. No human being could ever be worthless because every human being is made in the image of God. You are unique – I made fun of it earlier but it is true; there is literally no one else on the planet like you. You’re a sinner, but not worthless

because out of his great love for you the Father in heaven sent Jesus Christ to die for your sins and display his perfect patience in your life.

No matter how severe your affliction, you need to know that the grace of Jesus “super-abounds” to you. Doesn’t mean you don’t get therapy – good counselors can be a lot of help. It has nothing to do with the fact that some medication for a time might really help alleviate some symptoms. But you, like everyone else, need to know what Jesus has done for you.

Now, some application and we’ll be done. Paul says in verse 18 that Timothy is to “wage the good warfare.” That’s a clunky phrase. The old NIV puts it “fight the good fight.” That’s better. How do we do that?

First, (and I think this one is pretty obvious) if you know who you are and what Jesus has done it will humble you the way you need to be humbled. How could it not? You are the chief sinner, and God has had mercy on you and loved you and through Jesus Christ has reconciled you to him. Of course, you’ll be humbled by that. We all need this.

Remember the story of the Pharisee and tax collector from Luke 18? “⁹[Jesus] told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’” Luke 18:9-12. All the Pharisee can see is his good works and all he can do is look down on others. He thinks the tax collector, not himself, is the chief sinner, so the Pharisee hates him. Spiritual pride, the most destructive type of sin.

“But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” Luke 18:13-14. He knew he was the chief sinner so he was humbled, and in turn God exalted the tax collector.

Second, it will make you bold in the ways you need to be bold. Here we’ll look at 1 Timothy 1:18-20: “¹⁸This 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, ¹⁹holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, ²⁰among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.”

Paul thought of himself as the “chief sinner,” and that wasn’t just talk. He really thought that. Yet when he found error in the church, when he knew there were men in the church like Hymenaeus and Alexander who were leading people astray by teaching heresy, he called them out by name. He wasn’t timid. He said, “I have handed them over to Satan.” That means church discipline – that means “as long as these men are determined to teach things contrary to the gospel, put them out of the church. Don’t let them lead around anyone they could lead astray.”

When you drill the gospel deep into your heart like this you will find that you fear no man. You're not afraid of anything. You're certainly not afraid to have the hard conversations that if you love people you will eventually have to have. You're not afraid to stand up for what is right, for those who are being bullied or oppressed, or to speak your mind when it's needed. Why? ***When Jesus himself loves you and approves of you, who cares what anyone else thinks?***

This is what the gospel does to people who take it all the way into their hearts: it makes them bold, humble people. Loving, strong people. Caring, brave people. Qualities that rarely go together naturally in people the gospel provides in abundance.

There is nothing wrong with powerful, religious experiences. In fact, you should have them. But let's get them the way the New Testament gives them – by drilling the wonderful gospel of Jesus Christ all the way down so that it is the foundation of who we are and everything we do. And when that happens we can say, without any hint of phoniness or sanctimony at all, "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." Let's pray.