

1 TIMOTHY 1:12-17

INTRODUCTION

The release this past week of Venables and Thompson has raised a number of questions. Should they have been released? Is 8 years in a secure unit sufficient justice for the crime they committed? Would sending them to prison do them more harm than good? But one question that has interested me more than most is the question 'can people really change?' Have Venables and Thompson changed sufficiently so that they are no longer a danger to society? Well I don't want to answer any of the questions concerning Venables and Thompson for I do not know them and are not qualified to assess whether they have really changed or not.

But I do know that, it is possible for people to change dramatically. The Apostle Paul is an example of someone who was completely changed.

When I introduced this series of sermons we looked at Paul's conversion as it is recorded for us in Acts chapter 9. The context of 1 Timothy, as we have seen, concerns Paul's instruction to Timothy to contend for the faith. False doctrines were being taught within the church, and those false doctrines led to false practice. As we saw last time a false use of the law probably led to the teaching of these false doctrines so Paul spoke about the purpose of the law. He said that the law and the gospel must be in harmony. When Paul thought about the gospel, he was often overwhelmed by it. This seems to be the case in these verses for as he thinks about the gospel that God has entrusted him with, he is amazed. For as he thinks about what he was like, he is simply overcome that God now considers him faithful, appointing him in the work of his service (v 12).

1. WHAT PAUL WAS LIKE BEFORE HIS CONVERSION

What is amazing to Paul is the change that has taken place in his life. When he thinks about what he was and what he has now become, he is overcome with God's grace. Look how Paul describes himself.

a) Blasphemer, persecutor and violent - In order to fill in some of the background we need to remind ourselves of some passages that we considered a number of weeks ago. Look at Acts 8:1, & 3. Paul is present and is giving his approval to the death of Stephen who was the first Christian martyr. No doubt he was cheering on the crowd as the stones came crashing down upon Stephen. Picture that scene, just imagine the cries of anguish from Stephen and yet Saul as he was known then showed no mercy. As a result of Stephen's death a great persecution broke out against the church. Saul set about his work of destroying the church. Going from house to house, he dragged out any (men and woman) who professed to be followers of Jesus and he had them imprisoned (Acts 8:3) Then in Acts 9:1-2; we read that Saul was not content just to persecute the church locally but seeks the authority to go to Damascus in order to imprison believers who lived there.

Later on in Acts 26:9-11; when Paul is appearing before King Agrippa he again testifies to his ruthless past. He was a man obsessed with the destruction of the church. Of course from Paul view he actually thought he was doing God's work.

Even by thinking about the words that Paul uses here; it will tell us the sort of man he was. A blasphemer is one who slanders God, who overtly speaks evil of him. Not only was Paul a blasphemer but he had tried to force Christians to blaspheme as well (Acts 26:11). A persecutor of the church, we have seen how he did that. A violent man is a person with no normal concern for human kindness. In our modern language we might call Paul a bully as he tried to bully the church

into submission. Paul was driven by violence and great contempt for Christians. To see them humiliated and suffer brought him great pleasure.

b) Ignorant of Christ and an unbeliever in Christ (v 13) – Paul at no time thought he was doing anything wrong or sinful. He had a real passion for Judaism; he made headway in Judaism like no one else of his own age. He was zealous for his tradition and longed to maintain it (Galatians 1:13-14). He saw the church as a threat to his faith and therefore saw it as his duty to destroy it using whatever means he could. Paul was a Pharisee, which was a strict sect of Judaism, and as such he was devoted to keeping God's law. But like the false teachers at Ephesus, Paul and the Pharisees did not use the law properly for they thought that law keeping brought salvation.

He was ignorant of the truth of Christ. He had rejected Christ in his own mind, for Paul he was not the promised Messiah, he was convinced that Judaism was right and Christianity was wrong and not only wrong but dangerous. As a result of rejecting Christ he was an unbeliever. O he believed in God, of course he did but he did not believe in Christ as the Saviour or Messiah and as such, that made him an unbeliever. We need to move on but before I do let us all learn this lesson. It is possible to be religious and devote and yet be ignorant of God and an unbeliever in Christ. Even in this church, where the gospel is proclaimed, it is possible to be in such a condition.

2. WHAT PAUL BECAME (v 12)

i) Servant - Paul became a servant, or rather I should say that God considered him faithful, appointing him to His service (v 12). Paul is probably referring to his apostleship. When we read that Paul was considered faithful, it does not mean that God saw Paul and thought to himself that there is a man who is faithful therefore I can entrust Him with my gospel. No! The context tells us what is meant here. It means that by being entrusted with the gospel, God was putting his trust in Paul to be faithful with it. So it is with all true believers. We are entrusted as a church with the gospel, God is trusting us with His message, he is trusting that we will be faithful with it, by proclaiming it and in the context of this letter by maintaining its purity. Are we proving that God was wise to entrust us with the gospel?

But my main point that I want to draw out is the contrast from what Paul was to what Paul became. He changed from a blasphemer, to a proclaimer of God's word. He changed from a persecutor of the church to a servant of the church. From a violent man to someone whom has violence done to him. What or who made that difference in Paul's life?

God made the difference; it was He who made the changes in Paul's life. Look how Paul describes it here. He was "shown mercy," "the grace of our lord was poured out on me abundantly." Paul was changed by the mercy and grace of God. That, my dear friend, is the only way that anyone can really change permanently. Of course by our own efforts and with the help of others we may change certain things about ourselves, our habits etc, but if we are talking about permanent changes from the inside out then only God can do that. God can do that because of Jesus Christ. He came into the world to save sinners (v 15).

Although Paul doesn't say how Jesus accomplished the saving of sinners, we know from elsewhere how he did that. He did that by dying on the cross of behalf of sinners. He paid the price for our sins so that we could be forgiven and made right with God. God therefore shows us pity, and is merciful towards us and instead of receiving what we deserve which is hell he gives us grace. Grace is God's undeserved kindness, which in Paul's case was to grant him salvation and to change Him permanently for God's glory.

Look how Paul describes himself, the worst of sinners. In Paul's mind that is what he is, not was. As he looks back and views his life both before and after his conversion he sees it in a different light. In the light of God's grace and mercy, he sees sin as God sees it. Before his conversion

Paul thought he was doing God's work, but now he knows how wicked he was and therefore rightly sees himself as the worst of sinners. In truth every Christian who thinks about God's grace and mercy must surely come to this same conclusion, the worst of sinners. For it's only in the light of God's great grace and his mercy towards us that we begin to see what the Puritans called the sinfulness of sin. But O where sin abounds grace abounds even more (Romans 5:20-21). God's grace is so deep that it can reach anyone in any condition. It can reach people like Venables and Thompson, and in doing so can change such people permanently for the glory of God.

There was once an artist who painted a picture of the Niagara Falls, which he then gave to an art exhibition. The organisers saw that the artist did not give the painting a title. So they decided to call it 'More to follow.' Well I think that is a great name to call God's grace: 'More to follow.' For no matter how much grace God has shown us up to now, there is more to follow and no matter how deep people sink in sin, there is always enough grace for that person who genuinely turns to God in true repentance and faith. But before we close let's consider

3. HOW WE SHOULD RESPOND TO THIS GREAT TRUTH OF GOD SAVING SINNERS (V 16-17)

i) First of all notice what Paul says in verse 16. The conversion of Paul shows God's great patience with sinners. If Paul was shown mercy even though he tried God's patience then the good news is that God is willing to show mercy to sinners as bad as Paul and you can't have any worst than worst. Paul is an example to any sinner who will believe on Christ and receive eternal life. The lesson of Paul's conversion is that God shows mercy to sinners, even the worst of them. What this means for us is that we can take the gospel out with confidence. We can say to anyone, will you believe on Christ and receive eternal life?

Anyone who says to us 'we are too bad to be saved, 'can be pointed to the apostle Paul as an example of God's willingness to save sinners, even the worst of sinners. We can assure them of God's willingness to show mercy and to pour out grace upon sinners. Are you here today but as yet have not received God's mercy and grace. Not yet received Christ and eternal life? Well here is your invitation; Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Are you a sinner? If so you can be saved. Just believe upon Christ and receive eternal life. It really is that simple.

Our task as a church is to proclaim this great message in whatever way we can and to whomever we can. Are we all doing that? It's a great message, so please don't keep it to yourself pass it on.

ii) We ought to be thankful (v12) – Paul is so thankful to God for his conversion and for the inner strength to serve His Master. How thankful are we? Have you ever taken the time to consider what you once were and what you now are by the grace and mercy of God? A good dose of thankfulness would stop us complaining about this or that and it would give us a fresh appreciation of the love, grace and mercy of God.

iii) Worship (v 17) – It is no wonder that Paul concludes with this benediction. He is so taken up with the grace and mercy of God that he bows in worship to Him. This surely should be the response of every Christian today. Think of what you were? Think about what you are now, a servant of God. Think of God's mercy shown to us, and His grace poured out abundantly upon us. Think of the good news of the gospel that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Then let us go and proclaim this great gospel, urging sinners to believe on Christ.

Then let us come and worship Him. Amen