

The Goal is Love

(Part 2)

Passages: 1 Timothy 1:12-17
Matthew 6:9-15

You may not have realised it, but last week we started a new sermon series looking at Paul's first letter to Timothy.

In that first sermon, we saw how Paul responded to the growing tensions in the church in Ephesus...tensions between the Jewish and Greek Christians. The problem was that the certain *Jewish* Christians were demanding that the *Greek* Christians adhere to a long list of Old Testament food laws and cultural requirements. Paul opposed this idea and immediately instructs Timothy to “...*stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies.*” Paul wanted Timothy to stop the Jewish Christians from creating unnecessary barriers with the Gentile Christians by imposing OT Law upon them. Paul is clear that... “*These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith.*”

The whole point of last week's sermon, then, was to show how a local church is meant to be a place where various ethnic groups learn how to love one another. No one group in the church should make another group uncomfortable. No one group should impose their cultural ways upon another. Rather, every group is called to bring their culture and values to the table, sharing the good things that God has given to their culture while, at the same time, setting aside the things that do not help build up the body of Christ. As Paul said, “*The goal of this command is love, which comes from a sincere heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith.*”

Now, in today's passage (from the second half of 1 Timothy 1), the Apostle Paul goes on to make a huge admission: He tells his readers that he was once “*the worst of all sinners*”. Look at **verse 15**—“*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.*”

Have you ever wondered what sin Paul thought made him the worst sinner

of them all? Was it, for example, murder? Or adultery? Was it theft or perhaps idolatry? What was the sin that made Paul the “chief of sinners”?

Verse 13 gives us some clues: Paul tells us that he “*was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man...*” Of course, these three things (blasphemy, persecution and violence) were only symptoms of the greater sin that made Paul “*the chief of sinners*”! And what was that sin?

Paul’s greatest sin was the *sin of exclusion!* You see, Paul once believed that Judaism (with its cultural laws and identity) was the true religion. He also strongly believed that this new religion called ‘the Way’ was starting to contaminate Judaism by relaxing many of the OT laws and regulations! Indeed, that’s why Paul *persecuted* the church! That’s why Paul became so *violent* against Christians! He thought that any Jew who became a Christian was giving in to a false religion, one that would eventually take away the exclusive nature of his Jewish faith.

Listen to what is said about Paul (then called Saul) in the 9th chapter of the Book of Acts: (Acts 9:1-2) ***Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.***”

Here is the reason, then, why Paul unknowingly became a *blasphemer!* In his zeal to protect Judaism from contamination, he was actually standing in opposition to this fresh movement of God’s Spirit. While God was radically changing the Jewish religion...opening it up... making it accessible to all people through Jesus Christ, Paul was standing in direct opposition to this work of God. He was blaspheming against the Holy Spirit!

As I understand the story, Paul could see that it was his **sin of exclusion** that earned him the title, “**the chief of sinners**”!

Now, if this is true, then why do you think (in verses 12-17) Paul make such a big deal about being the ‘chief of sinners’? Why, at this point in the letter, does Paul speak so passionately about his sin?

I think it’s obvious! **Paul sees a lot of himself in these men!** He

recognizes that the Jewish Christians of Ephesus are falling into the same trap that he fell into years earlier! As they preach the Law, they are reverting to the way Paul was—namely, an exclusivist! And that’s why, starting with verse 12, Paul publicly confesses his **sin of exclusion**, calling himself “the worst of sinners”. **He wants to warn them of the gravity of their sin!** Clearly, in Paul’s mind, anyone who (like he once did) promotes *exclusivist* tendencies is destroying the work of Christ and the building of His church! It is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as well as an act of violence and persecution against God’s people!

I was talking to my Korean hairdresser a few weeks ago about this very problem of exclusionism. You see, he was telling me how he emigrated from Korea only a few years ago and how he is now seeking citizenship. But, he quickly added: “*Even though I want to live here, I will always be Korean.*” When I asked him what he meant by that, he proudly told me: “*Korea is a superior culture; we are the best country in the world! And so, even though I live in Australia, I will always be Korean.*”

That’s when I told him he was being **racist!** I explained that all nations and cultures come from the same source; that we’re all descended from Adam and Eve and that no one is superior. We are all one family. I told him that there are good and bad things in every culture; that’s because sin has affected all human beings. Nevertheless, Jesus Christ has come to deal with our sin and redeem our cultures. Jesus, *the Second Adam*, has come to make all human beings united as one family again by rescuing us from the lies of the Evil One that make us believe that one race or culture is better than another.

Interestingly, my hairdresser calls himself a Christian! And so, I spoke to him with passion... and a bit of anger! I told him that he had swallowed the lie of the devil! I told him he was racist!

Well, four weeks went by and, just last week, I went back to have my haircut. The first thing he said to me was, “*You know, you’re right-- I am racist. And it’s not good.*”

Now, it’s this confession...this admission of the *sin of exclusion*...that brings us to the heart of today’s passage! For you see, when Paul tells us that he was the worst of sinners, he says it in the context of Christ’s forgiveness and love...and His power to transform us...to save us from our

racist/exclusionist tendencies!

Verse 13: ***“Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy...”***

Verse 14: ***“The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly...”***

Verse 15: ***“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, o whom I am the worst.”***

And so, Paul’s point to Timothy is quite simple: He is saying to Timothy, *“When you go to command those men to stop preaching division, don’t ever forget that God still loves them and wants to change their hearts. And he can do that—just remember what God did with me!”* Paul then adds these powerful words in verse 16: ***“But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.”***

Now if you remember, according to Paul’s conversion story in Acts 9, the first thing that God did to change Paul’s **heart** was to make him go **blind**. You see, as God re-opened his eyes, Paul was enabled to see that the Gentiles are fellow heirs of the promises of God! This is why Paul then became the missionary to the gentiles, because God led him to see the folly of his *exclusionist* ways!

Of course, it can be quite difficult for us to see our own sins of exclusion. Nevertheless, Paul encourages Timothy to persevere by using his own story as example of what God can do! God is patient and, if we allow Him, we will soon see the inherent beauty of all cultures. God is seeking inclusion, not exclusion!

(Short excursus on “The Lord’s Prayer” in Matthew 6-- **“Our Father”** ... not “my Father”!!!)

As a quick side-note to this first chapter of 1 Timothy, I wonder whether Paul’s reference to Hymanaeus and Alexander in verses 18-20 was essentially the problem in reverse. I mean, their names suggest that they were men from the Greek side of the church. Could it be that they were stirring up exclusionist sentiments among the Greek Christians? No one knows for certain, but Paul makes a point to label their sin that of ‘blasphemy’, a common problem to Paul’s own former sin! One thing we do know is that Paul tells Timothy not to give in to them. ***“I have handed***

(them) ***over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.***” Whatever these two characters were doing to undermine the church in Ephesus, Paul certainly wanted none of it to continue!

And so, the lesson of 1 Timothy 1 is clear: No one, cultural group must be allowed to divide or to dominate the church of Jesus Christ! His church is a place where ***“there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, but all of us are one in Christ Jesus!”*** Unity of cultures, languages and worship is the hallmark of the new creation...the new humanity...that Christ is creating on this earth in His bride, the church. If we allow Him to touch our eyes and renew our vision (as happened to Paul), He will show us the glory and beauty of His multi-ethnic church.

“Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.”