

## CHRIST JESUS CAME TO SAVE SINNERS

1 Timothy 1:12-20

Key Verse: 1:15

*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst.*

This is a Christmas message by St. Paul. It's not a typical message for Christmas. It does not include the story of Mary and Joseph. Nor does it include the wise men from the east, the star of Jesus, the city of Bethlehem, the manger, the shepherds in the field and the angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." Still, this is a message that has a simple, but the most important point of Christmas—Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

### I. JESUS CAME TO SAVE US (12-17)

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.* St. Paul was writing to Timothy, his beloved spiritual son and Bible student who was now serving as a pastor in Ephesus. Paul began with the phrase, "Here is a trustworthy saying." Paul used this expression several times in his letters before telling something important to Timothy (3:1; 4:9; 2Ti 2:11). It was his way of saying, "Listen, Timothy, this is important. You should take this to your heart." So what is Paul's important message for Timothy and us? He says, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." This is the one message that Paul never failed to deliver to his listeners. Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners. Jesus did not come to this world, just to help us to improve our living conditions or to become better people. He came to save us from our sin and death. He came to give us eternal life. This is the good news of Christmas. This is the reason why we are joyful, not because of presents, Christmas tree, reindeer, and jingle bells.

Christ Jesus came into the world. The Son of God became a human being. The Heavenly Prince lowered himself to be among us. He was born to a poor couple, Mary and Joseph, from Galilee, when they were in the small town of Bethlehem, because of a census declared by Roman Emperor. The couple couldn't even get a room in Motel 6. There was no room in the inn. So they had to spend the night in an animal barn. There the Baby Jesus was born. There was no doctor to deliver him. No nurse to attend him. He was laid in a manger which is a wooden container for animal feed. Why was the Son of God born in this humble way? Why did he have to come into this world at all? It was because we sinners could not save ourselves. We could not climb up to the Holy God on a ladder. So God came to us. It was God's initiative to send his Son to us. God came down to this world to save sinners like us. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16).

Some people may say, "Well, Jesus didn't have to come for me. I am not a bad person. I am pretty good. He doesn't need to save me." According to statistics, a

majority of people in the U.S. believe that they will go to heaven simply because they are pretty good or they go to church once in a while. Not many people believe that they deserve to go to hell. Well, I have news for them. They would be surprised to hear what Jesus says about this. Jesus says in Matthew 7:14 that the gate to heaven is small and the road is narrow and only a few find it. The truth is that there is not a single person in the whole world who has not committed sin. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Ro 3:23). There is no one righteous, not even one (Ro 3:10). Most of us are not criminals. We keep the law of our society, though some of us are guilty of violating speed limits. But we are sinners before God. Who among us can claim we are not proud before God? Who can say we never failed to thank him for his love? Jesus says that we have already committed adultery if we have a lustful desire toward someone (Mt 5:28). So all human beings, without exception, are condemned to hell in eternity. There are some serious problems facing the mankind today, including poverty, breakdown of family values, chemical and biological warfare, climate change, and so on. In the U.S., we have huge budget deficits and mounting national debts, and healthcare situation that is a mess. But, spiritually speaking, the most serious problem facing the mankind is the sin problem. This particular disease afflicts every single person. It knows no political or cultural boundaries. Every single person is sick with this terminal illness. All of us are destined to die once. But physical death is not the end of everything. There is the second death. The Bible says that all unsaved sinners will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur in eternity (Rev 21:8). And no advanced science and technology can offer a solution for this problem of mankind. We have fallen and we cannot get up. We sinners cannot approach the Holy God on our own. And that is why God, in his mercy and love, sent his one and only Son Jesus to us. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. What an amazing news for us! You would be thrilled if you won a \$400 million Powerball lottery, thinking your life would never be the same. But the news of Jesus' coming is much greater than winning a Powerball. Each of us won a jackpot, because Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners like us!

Look at the last part of verse 15. St. Paul says: *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.* Paul was deeply moved to know that Jesus came to save sinners like him who was the worst kind of sinner. He felt that if a person like him could be saved by Christ, anyone could be saved. He said twice that he was the worst of sinners. Look at verse 16. *But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.* Paul considered himself the worst of sinners. On the other hand, many people consider themselves a little bit better than others. We have a tendency of looking at the speck of sawdust in other people's eye and pay no attention to the plank in our own eye (Mt 7:3), not realizing that we are committing a sin when we do this. But Paul says that he was the most terrible sinner of all. Yet, Christ Jesus came to save him. Christ Jesus displayed his unlimited patience and unconditional love for a sinner like him as an example for those who would believe in Jesus. Paul felt that he was a case study, a living example that any kind of sinner can be saved if he or she comes to Jesus with repentance and believes in him. Paul was saying, "Look what Christ did for me, such a terrible sinner! If he can save me, he can certainly save you, no matter what you have done!"

In fact, Paul gave a personal testimony in verses 12-14. *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.* Paul's testimony can be summarized with two points—he was grateful for the grace of salvation, and he was also grateful for the grace of God's calling to mission.

**First, “the grace of our Lord was poured out on me.”** Paul never forgot what kind of sinner he had been before Jesus saved him. He says he was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man. Paul's original name was Saul. He was a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in Jerusalem. Under Gamaliel, he was thoroughly trained in the Jewish law (Ac 22:3). He was an ambitious young rabbi who saw an opportunity to score big for his future career by putting down the young Christian movement. He led the persecution of the believers in Jerusalem, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison (Ac 22:4). He was in charge of stoning Stephen to death (Ac 7:58). Afterwards, he continued to breathe out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples (Ac 9:1). He went to the high priest and obtained letters of approval to go to Damascus to arrest more Christians there. But on his way to Damascus, the Risen Christ appeared to him personally, and Paul's life was changed forever.

Paul never forgot his past sins so that he could remember the grace of God. When he persecuted the Christians, he thought he was serving God. He thought he was doing God a favor. He acted in ignorance and unbelief. But God did not crush him. Instead, he saved him and poured out his grace on him. Paul testified this grace again and again. He never got tired of telling this story. It is also important for us to remember what kind of sinners we had been when Jesus saved us. I also had been an ignorant blasphemer, telling people that only weak people needed God. I was selfish and self-centered, not caring about anyone but me. I was also full of lustful desires. In short, I was not a blessing to others. The world could have been better off without me. But God had mercy on this worthless sinner and came to me with his arms stretched out for me. He saved me from my sins and gave me a new hope in the kingdom of God. The Lord said to me, “Come, follow me, and I will make you a fisher of men.” And he kept the promise. I am what I am today because of God's grace. I pray that each of us may look back on our past life and think about the grace and mercy of God upon us.

**Second, “I thank the Lord for appointing me to his service.”** Some people praise God for saving them from their sins, and then go on with their lives that are not much different from their past lives. But St. Paul reminds us that God did not save us at the cost of his own Son's life so we might continue to live selfish and cursed lives. Look at verse 12 again. *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service.* Paul thanked God for not only the grace of salvation but also the grace of calling him to his service. Ephesians 2:10 says: “For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” We have been recreated in Christ to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do. This means that we should not be satisfied with living the life of a Sunday Christian. God has a purpose for our lives. He

wants us to do good works. We are saved by faith alone, not by works. But knowing we have been saved by his grace, we now have work to do. We have a mission to serve the Lord who sacrificed his own life for us. Let us thank God, as Paul did, for the grace of calling us to his service so that we may share the wonderful gospel of Jesus Christ with young people of our time.

Again we learn how important it is to remember what kind of sinners we used to be. Without knowing what kind of sinners we used to be, we cannot fully appreciate why Christ Jesus came into this world and what he has done for us. Suppose a death row inmate is commuted of his sentence by a governor, and suppose that the man says that he cannot remember his crime. Can we say the criminal really knows the grace of forgiveness? St. Paul knew the grace of forgiveness. Every time, he remembered the grace of Jesus upon his life, a song of praise welled up in his heart. Look at verse 17. *Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.* Paul's heart was filled with thanksgiving when he remembered the grace of Jesus. That is why even his prison letters are also filled with joy and thanksgiving. A source of his strength was his remembrance of the grace of Jesus.

## II. FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT OF FAITH (18-20)

Look at verses 18-19a. *Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well, holding on to faith and a good conscience.* Paul reminded Timothy how his gift of preaching and teaching had been prophesied for him by God's servants (1Ti 4:14). When they laid their hands on Timothy, the church elders must have prayed, "Lord, we know that you will use Timothy as a great Bible teacher and a shepherd." It is a blessing to have such prophetic prayers offered on our behalf by God's servants. We are encouraged when we remember such prayers for us.

Paul then gave an instruction to Timothy to fight the good fight of faith, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Why did Paul tell him to fight the good fight of faith? What does it mean to fight the good fight of faith? What can we learn from this teaching?

**First, the life of faith is a battle.** Timothy was a timid person (2Ti 1:7). He was not a charismatic leader. He was also younger in age than some other leaders in the church. Paul told him to be a spiritual leader by fighting the good fight of the faith. Paul wanted him to know that to live as a servant of God is not easy. Some people expect to live an easier life when they become a Christian. Of course, it is not too difficult to live as a Sunday Christian. You put in a little bit of effort and get a lot of prayer support from fellow believers. But to live a truly committed life of faith and mission as a disciple of Jesus is not easy at all. In fact, Paul implies here that it is a battle we have to fight.

Now if a Christian life is a battle, who is our enemy? We may cite enemies such as the corrupt culture of ours, materialism, hedonism, our selfish nature, our sins, and so on. But our real enemy is Satan. The devil is clever in waging guerilla warfare against us. He hides behind things or people to attack us. So we are sometimes fooled by his tactics

and fail to recognize him as our real enemy. For example, we sometimes consider other people as our enemies. How many times do we think that our lives would be better off, if we could get rid of some people around us? At work, you may have a nasty boss. You may have other annoying people around you. And you might think that all your problems will be gone if they were not around you. But people are not our enemies. Our problems will not disappear by getting rid of all annoying people around us. The real enemy is hiding behind the ugly behavior of these people. The enemy effectively utilizes his weapon of fear and doubt to make people follow their sinful nature. He tempts us to follow our sinful nature rather than the word of God. St. Paul says in Ephesians 6:12: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but ... against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” So next time you feel a person is attacking you, look behind him to find the real enemy, and pray to God to help him.

**Second, how to fight the good fight.** Knowing who our enemy is, we have to fight the good fight of faith. But how? Paul says we can do this by holding on to faith and a good conscience. What does it mean to hold on to a good conscience? Some people say, “Follow your conscience. If it feels good, do it.” The problem is that not everyone has a good conscience. If all people in this world had good consciences, no one would do bad things. The fact is that our God-given consciences have been damaged when sin entered into this world. Our consciences were “seared as with a hot iron” (1Ti 4:2). We cannot always rely on our conscience to tell us what is right and what is wrong. The word of God is the absolute yardstick for that. That’s why I think Paul mentioned faith in God whenever he talked about a good conscience (5,19). We must rely on God and his word. I believe that the word of God can help us to develop spiritual insight we need in order to tell right and wrong. The truth of God can help us to make good decisions in life. That is why studying the word of God faithfully is so important for us. We must hold on to our faith in God and a good conscience to fight the good fight of faith.

In the early church, however, there were some leaders who rejected these truths. Look at verses 19b-20. *Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.* Paul says these men shipwrecked their faith. They not only ruined their own lives but also had a bad influence on others, especially young believers. Paul could not just sit around and watch the things these men were doing to hurt other believers. He decided to kick them out of the church, like a surgeon has to remove cancer in order to save the body. The ultimate purpose of this was to help them to see what they were doing and repent their sins, and come back to God. Disciplines in the church are always to strengthen, purify and train, not to condemn or permanently expel someone.

In conclusion, let us learn from St. Paul a secret for a victorious life of faith and mission. It is to hold on to the grace of God for us. Christ Jesus came to save sinners like us. Let us remember God’s grace of salvation and the grace of calling to service. May God help each of us to fight the good fight of faith to the end!