

CHRIST JESUS CAME INTO THE WORLD

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.

In today's passage, St. Paul gives us his secret of how to live a victorious life as a disciple of Jesus. We learn that a life of faith and mission is a spiritual battle. Let us find out how we can be victorious in our life of faith and mission.

I. PAUL'S PERSONAL TESTIMONY (12-14)

In the first part of this chapter, Paul introduced himself as an apostle of Christ. He called Timothy his true son in Christ Jesus. Then he instructed Timothy to command the false teachers to stop teaching false doctrines and devote themselves to the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. The goal of his command was love. Paul urged Timothy and other leaders in the church to build a Christian community in which they loved Jesus and loved one another. We also pray that our church may be a fellowship of people who love Jesus and love one another in Christ.

Paul knew, however, words of instructions were never enough. He knew that they needed a good example in life. Some leaders might say, "Do as I say; don't do as I do." But not Paul. He gave a personal testimony to encourage the believers in Ephesus. Look at verses 12-14. *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, 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.* Whenever Paul remembered the grace of Jesus for his life, thanksgiving welled up in his heart. He begins his short life testimony by thanking Jesus first. His 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 abundantly." 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 in the Jewish society in Jerusalem by putting down the Christian movement. He persecuted the followers of the Way to their death, 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 in the city. And as we

know, the Risen Christ appeared to him personally on his way to Damascus, and Paul's life was changed forever.

Paul never forgot his past sins so that he could remember the grace of God. We can say that he had a sense of history in God. In his pride and ignorance, he thought he was serving God when he persecuted the Christians. 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 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." I am what I am today because of God's grace. I pray that each of us may look back often on our lives 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 old ones. But God did not save us at the cost of his own Son's life so that we might live selfish and self-centered lives. Look at verse 12 again. *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, 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 us. 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 a mandate 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.

Humanly speaking, Paul's life as an apostle of Christ was a difficult one. He went through many sufferings. He was beaten, imprisoned, insulted, and otherwise persecuted, all because of his service to the Lord. If not for God's calling, he could have risen to a prominent rabbi in Jerusalem and lived a good life enjoying all the perks. But Paul never looked back and second-guessed his decision to follow Jesus. He knew how wonderful to be with Christ who loved him. He was also joyful in his eager expectations to spend the time of eternity with Christ in heaven.

II. A TRUSTWORTHY SAYING (15-17)

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.* "Here is a

trustworthy saying”—Paul said these words 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.” So what was his important message for Timothy? He says, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.” This is the one message that Paul never failed to deliver to his listeners. Christ Jesus came to this world to save sinners. Jesus did not just come to help us to improve our human conditions, to live better or to be better people. He came to save us from our sins. He came to give us eternal life. This is the good news.

St. Paul felt that if a person like himself could be saved by Christ, anyone could be saved. He says 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 unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.* Paul considered himself the worst of sinners. Sinful people think of 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 displayed his unlimited patience and unconditional love for a sinner like him as an example. He felt that he was a case study, a living example that any kind of sinner can be saved if he comes to Jesus with repentance and believes in him. He was saying, “Look what Christ did for me, such a terrible person! If he can save me, he can certainly save you, no matter what you did in the past!”

Again we learn how important it is to remember what kind of sinner we used to be. Without knowing what kind of sinners we used to be, we cannot fully appreciate what Christ has done for us. Suppose a death row inmate is commuted of his sentence by a governor, and suppose that he 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.

III. FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT OF FAITH (18-20)

What was the real reason why Paul gave a personal testimony about the grace of God for his life? Look at verses 18-19a. *Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience.* Paul first 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 be a servant of God was not an easy life. 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 as a truly committed life of 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 our enemy. Satan 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 annoying people around us? At work, you may have a nasty boss. You may have annoying in-laws or relatives. Even some mission coworkers bother you when they don't seem to care about you. You might think that all your problems are caused by these people. 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 rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and 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. A servant of God must hold on to faith when everyone else is full of doubt. He should not shy away from this spiritual fight. He should not compromise with the prince of darkness, but fight the good fight against him. Paul says we can do this by holding on to faith and a good conscience. By faith in God, we must resist temptations. By faith in Christ, we must obey the word of God, not our natural feelings.

What does it mean to hold on to a good conscience? Some people may be confused about this. They might 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). People can have bad conscience. We cannot always rely on our

conscience to tell us what is right and what is wrong. The word of God tells us that. Our good consciences can still help us to follow what is right by faith. Paul says that we need to hold on to our faith in God and a good conscience to fight the good fight of faith.

Third, what if some give up the fight? In the early church, 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.* We don't know the details of what these two men did in the church. 2 Timothy 2:17-18 tell us that Hymenaeus taught that the resurrection had already taken place. He became a false teacher. 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 says that he had handed them over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme. What does this mean? Did Paul give up on them? No. Paul still loved them. These men were probably his former Bible students. But Paul could not just sit around and watch the things these men were doing to hurt other believers. He decided to remove them from the fellowship of the church. He kicked them out from the fellowship. The ultimate purpose of this was to help them to see what they were doing before God and repent their sins, and come back. Disciplines in the church are always to strengthen, purify, train, and correct, not to condemn, suspect, withhold forgiveness, or permanently expel someone.

We learned today that Paul's secret to fight the good fight of faith was to hold on to the grace of God for his life. We want to do God's work wholeheartedly. But sometimes we do not know what to do. We learn that we must 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 by remembering the grace of Jesus Christ and by holding on to our faith and a good conscience!