

The Quality of Mercy
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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1 Timothy 1:3-17

I picked this passage because it seemed to contain a strange tension within it, something close to a contradiction. As I read it, see if you can pick up what seems like it might be a double standard being held by Paul. So where is the potential double standard? It's in the tension between the way Jesus treated the misguided Paul at his conversion, and the way Paul wants to treat the misguided teachers of Ephesus who are teaching false doctrine.

On the one hand, in verses 12-17, you have this beautiful description of God's grace shown to Paul at his conversion. This is one of the most famous passages in all of 1 Timothy. It's the sort of thing we read as an assurance of pardon in our morning services because it tells us that there is hope even for the worst sinners. "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy." It's an eloquent statement about the power of grace. There was a day when Paul was a persecutor of Christians. There was a day when he was a blasphemer and a violent man. There was a day when he was in his own way a false teacher and an enemy of God. But God in his mercy turned him around. Paul had experienced amazing grace on the Damascus road. So that's all wonderful and good. Paul gives a powerful testimony of God's grace, and if that was all this passage said there would be no problem.

But now compare that to what Paul says at the beginning of our passage. There are false teachers loose in Ephesus. They are devoting themselves to genealogies and myths instead of devoting themselves to the gospel. They are enemies of sound doctrine. But how does Paul react to these enemies? Paul seems quite angry with them: "Command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer!" he tells Timothy. In verse 20 - which I didn't read - he tells Timothy how he has dealt with two of these false teacher types: he has handed them over to Satan so that they might be taught not to blaspheme. Paul is quite harsh with these wayward men. He comes down hard on them.

Do you see the contrast? Do you see the potential double standard? Paul was a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, and God has mercy on him. The false teachers are also corrupt and misled, and Paul responds with stern words. What's going on here? Has Paul forgotten the grace of his own conversion? Is Paul like the man in the parable of the unmerciful servant who has been forgiven his great debt, but who then refuses to turn around and slams the man who owes him a much smaller sum?

Commentators have recognized the potential double standard here, and they have found a way to explain it. Some say there is no double standard because of verse 13. In verse 13 Paul gives a kind of reason why he was shown mercy: "I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance." So the commentators seize on that and they say, "Look, the reason Paul can at one moment, be so thankful for mercy received and, at the next moment, so harsh is that Paul is different than these false teachers! When Paul was persecuting and blaspheming, he didn't know any better. He was acting in ignorance and therefore he is forgivable! The teachers of Ephesus should have known better." The commentators say that Paul is pleading Numbers 15:27. There the law makes a distinction between intentional sin and unintentional sin. Sin committed unintentionally is less severe than sin committed by people who know full well what they're

doing. People who sin unintentionally can bring an offering to the priest and they are forgiven. But, says Numbers 15, “anyone who sins defiantly, whether native born or alien, blasphemes the Lord and that person must be cut off from his people.” So, commentators will say, “there is no double standard because Paul’s sin is that unintentional sin, the sin committed in ignorance. The false teachers of Ephesus are sinning intentionally and defiantly. They know full well what they’re doing, and so no mercy for them.”

It’s an interesting explanation, but I don’t buy it. And there are a couple of reasons why. First of all, does Paul seem like he’s trying to downplay his sinfulness? Is he trying to excuse himself from blame? Specifically, in verses 12-17 is Paul trying to position himself as a minor league sinner compared to others? No way. It’s just the opposite. “Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the WORST.” How likely is it that in verse 13 Paul would say that he got mercy because he wasn’t as bad as those willful sinners, and then only two verses later say the he is the worst of sinners? It doesn’t make sense.

And second, Paul doesn’t just call himself ignorant with respect to his sin, he suggests that the false teachers are also sinning in ignorance: “They do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.” That’s ignorance. I don’t think you can use Numbers 15 to say that Paul was guilty of a lesser sin, and therefore more worthy of mercy. It seems to me that pre-conversion Paul and these false teachers both stand equally unworthy, equally sinful before God. So then we’re left with the potential double standard. We’re still left with the question: How can Paul celebrate God’s mercy to him when he was a false teacher, and then turn around and harshly condemn the false teachers of Ephesus?

I think the real reason this looks like a potential double standard to us is that we don’t understand mercy. We think there’s a double standard because what Paul received from God was clearly mercy in our mind, and what he is proposing for these false teachers doesn’t seem so merciful to us. But maybe that’s a sign that our understanding of mercy needs tweaking. We tend to have a very passive notion of mercy. We think of mercy very narrowly in terms of acceptance. Mercy is when a horrible sinner like Paul is accepted by God in spite of himself. Mercy is Jesus accepting and loving prostitutes and tax collectors and eating with them. Mercy is the Father welcoming the prodigal Son home with open arms. When we think of mercy as simply acceptance, we make it sound passive. Mercy is a warm inviting bath into which the worst of sinners can slip and be soothed.

But Biblical mercy is a little more active than that. It has a dynamic, even and aggressive dimension. To capture mercy’s more active side I was tempted to call this sermon ‘Mercied by God.’ I was tempted to use mercy as a verb, which isn’t something you can do in English. But it is something you can do in Greek. When your Bible says “I was shown mercy,” the Greek literally says, “I was mercied, so that in me, Christ might show his unlimited patience.”

Using mercy as an active verb isn’t something you can do officially in English, but a sort of unofficial usage has crept into the language. Ask a softball player. In my church softball days we had something called a mercy rule. When one team was winning by more than ten runs after 6 innings, the game was called so that the losing team won’t be completely humiliated. The mercy rule has led to a new way of speaking among softball players. When one team beats another team so badly that the mercy rule is invoked, the winning team says to each other, “We mercied them.” How did your softball game go? “Oh it was great! We mercied them!!” Or as was more often the case when I played: How did your softball game go? “Oh, not so good. We got mercied.” You see what we’ve done? We’ve made mercy into an active verb. To mercy someone is to really take it to them, to dominate them, to overwhelm them.

While I'm not sure that we want to directly compare God's mercy to Paul with one softball team pounding on another, it wouldn't be a bad thing if some of that active sense of the word got into our understanding. God's mercy toward Paul was far more than warm acceptance. God's mercy pummeled Paul. God's mercy overwhelmed him. Paul experienced God's mercy as an active transforming force. God's mercy accepted him sure, but it also knocked him over, it turned his world upside down, it blinded him, it pushed him out of a safe life and into a life where he was beaten, abused and constantly in danger. The mercy of God was not a warm soothing bath. It was a swiftly running river of grace, a river transformed him and swept him away, into a new and wonderful life. *Jesus mercied Paul.*

And not only Paul. Poor Zaccheus the tax collector got accepted freely by Jesus, and by the end of a day walking in the light of Jesus' mercy, he ended giving away half his stuff to the poor. *Zaccheus got mercied.* And poor Peter, just minding his business, mending his nets, Jesus comes along and calls him to follow. Peter ends up on this wild wonderful journey. He gets to be involved in things that no fisherman could ever dream of, but he also endures terrible pain and hardship, and if tradition is to be trusted, ends up being executed for following Jesus. *Peter got mercied.* And so did Abraham and Moses and Noah and a whole host of others whose lives were overwhelmed by God's mercy. Mercy is more than acceptance; it is also transformation. It's not a warm bath. It's a clear, rushing, life-giving river of grace.

And when you understand mercy in that way, you begin to realize that what Paul is urging for these false teachers is mercy. Paul wants them to receive the same sort of transforming love that knocked him down and turned him around. Paul doesn't want the church to give up on these men. 'After all,' says Paul, 'I was the worst of sinners. I was even worse than those knuckleheads with their endless genealogies and their myths, and yet Jesus got to me. If he can do it with me, he can get to anyone.' So don't give up on them. Love them, keep contact with them, and when necessary confront them and challenge them. Keep the mercy flowing. So, out of what looked like a double standard appears this wonderful, full-bodied mercy: a mercy that has the radical acceptance you see in the story of the prodigal son, a mercy transforming power that you see in the story of the apostle Paul.

As I read this passage and thought about this full-bodied mercy, I thought of a story Tony Campolo tells. When Campolo was teaching at the university of Pennsylvania, he was an advisor to two students who were friends, but who were very different. One was a committed Christian of ordinary intellectual ability. The other was a brilliant Neo-Marxist Atheist. The Neo-Marxist atheist was not only brilliant; he was one of these people who loved to argue. He could argue circles around people and back them into a corner and make them look silly. That's why Campolo was really concerned when he found out that both these two students were going to go to Cornell for grad school and they were going to room together. He feared for the faith of the Christian. Imagine his surprise when he visited Cornell a year and a half later only to find out that the Neo-marxist Atheist had become a Christian!! "How did this happen?" Campolo wondered. "Well," said the atheist, "every time we got into an intellectual argument about the faith, I would win and my roommate would simply say, "I know what you're saying but it doesn't matter. I know that Jesus is alive. I know that he is with me. I have sensed his power and his leading in my life." He kept testifying to Christ's mercy with his words and his life. He lived that steady active, engaged mercy with his friend. Over time the testimony and the kindness and the love wore him down. The atheist finally gave in to a God who was bigger than his arguments. *You might say he was mercied.*

This passage is a challenge for us to show a full-bodied active mercy to each other and to the people in our lives. But maybe more importantly this passage is a comfort. “Here is a trustworthy saying. And one worthy of full acceptance: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.” That full-bodied active mercy which overwhelmed Paul is still at work in this world. His mercy is still flowing, through our ordinary acts of service and testimony. His mercy is still working in our neighbors, friends, and children, to transform them. And His mercy will win. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen

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